# 1AC---Round 3---Dartmouth

## 1AC

### Bureaucracy Adv---1AC

#### Advantage 1: BUREAUCRACY.

#### Trump has axed federal collective bargaining, dooming the administrative state.

Jennifer Dorning 25. President of the Department for Professional Employees at the AFL-CIO. "Congress must immediately restore the union rights of federal employees." The Hill. 9/1/2025. thehill.com/opinion/congress-blog/labor/5477873-trump-union-busting-attack

In March, President Trump signed an executive order intended to strip nearly 1 million federal employees of their union rights at multiple agencies.

Over the last month, the Trump administration has started to implement the president’s union-busting executive order by unilaterally and unlawfully terminating union contracts at the Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Union rights provide federal employees a way to improve their workplaces and report wrongdoing. The loss of union rights, therefore, not only impacts federal employees, but also the American people, who depend on the federal government and the services it provides.

That is why, on this Labor Day, we are calling on Congress to immediately pass the Protect America’s Workforce Act.

The Protect America’s Workforce Act is bipartisan legislation introduced by Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.) and Jared Golden (D-Maine) and cosponsored by 222 members of Congress.

It restores the collective bargaining rights of the union federal employees impacted by President Trump’s attempted union-busting. It has the majority support needed to pass if it came to the House floor for a vote today.

Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle back the Protect America’s Workforce Act because they know that employees with a voice in their workplace have higher morale and are able to better serve the American people.

In fact, Republicans supporting the bill wrote to President Trump emphasizing that collective bargaining in the federal government plays a positive role by providing a structured way for employees and management to communicate and address workplace concerns.

Specifically, through collective bargaining, federal employees are able to offer expertise and experience that improves processes, reduces waste and generates efficiencies.

Officers at the Transportation Security Administration have been able to negotiate for policies that provide for better work-life balance and expanded benefits that have helped performance and retention at the agency.

Additionally, collective bargaining at the Department of Veterans Affairs led to an improved promotion process, which is important to ensuring the agency can retain talented staff.

At the Social Security Administration, union members secured more time for employees to attend and complete training that helps them perform their responsibilities more effectively.

Union rights also provide federal employees with a voice and protections that allows them to push back against politically motivated requests to compromise professional standards or ignore facts without putting their jobs at risk.

For example, EPA staff secured scientific integrity provisions and whistleblower protections in their union contract to ensure federal scientists cannot be pressured to alter climate data to align with political agendas. FEMA employees, who support communities that have suffered from natural disasters, negotiated for the right to refuse unlawful orders.

If federal employees’ union rights are not restored, we can expect to see a politicized civil service that puts politicians and special interests ahead of the American people. This means that the effectiveness of government services will suffer, which will result in worse outcomes for everyday Americans.

#### Only unions save the bureaucracy from politicization. Trump exacerbated a long-term trend but isn’t an anomaly.

Donad Moynihan 21. Professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, Ph.D. in public administration from Syracuse University. "Populism and the Deep State: The Attack on Public Service Under Trump." *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration*, 151-159.

Introduction

This chapter addresses the ways in which the Trump administration has exemplified and sped up a long-term trend toward democratic backsliding in the United States by undermining public sector institutions, with particular focus on the federal career public service. While previous administrations have looked for ways to exert closer control over parts of government they are ideologically at odds with, the Trump administration has gone further. It has sidelined administrative expertise and scientists in many areas, selecting senior leaders whose lack of qualification is frequently matched only by their disdain for their organizational mission. To achieve its goals, the Trump administration has shown a willingness to push the boundaries of the law beyond its breaking point. While avoiding a direct attack on the civil service via a governmentwide reform, the Trump administration has sought to weaken the ability of public sector unions to negotiate for benefits, punished individuals and units deemed not to be politically loyal, and weakened oversight bodies such as Inspectors General. All of this has been accompanied by a rhetoric of delegitimization, where the President and his supporters frequently invoke conspiratorial theories of “deep state” plots that have been embedded in the Republican Party. The broader picture suggests that Trump is an outlier, but not an anomaly, in terms of US democratic backsliding.

There can be little doubt that the Trump administration counts as a populist movement. What Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, 6) define as populism surely fits: “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the [general will] of the people.” Trumpism has few fixed ideological points of reference. Its marriage to traditional Republican policies has resulted not in more redistributive policies via a more generous welfare state, but greater tax cuts tilted toward higher earners, and economic nationalism characterized by trade wars and reduced immigration (both legal and illegal). The rhetorical marriage of Trumpism and the paranoid style that resided largely in the Republican Party since the 1960s has been a more natural union, built on shared assumptions of “1) a small number of people is (2) secretly plotting to (3) do significant harm” (Rank 2020, 363), where the members of the career civil service are cast as among the usual suspects (Hofstader 2012).

Trump’s great gifts as a politician are portraying the world in in Manichean terms, as a battle between the forces of evil and good. He began his official campaign by presenting Mexican immigrants as rapists, and has continued to portray immigrants and shadowy “globalists” as invaders threatening America. Even before he became a candidate, he built a base within the Republican party by joining the birther movement that questioned whether President Obama was actually born in America, and by extension, whether his Presidency was legitimate. Opposition Democrats are routinely portrayed as corrupt. This populist rhetorical style has been extended to the public sector. While previous Presidents engaged in some form of bureaucracy bashing, Trump went dramatically further, portraying the broader administrative system as a “deep state” or “swamp” that only he can fix.

The difficulty in any evaluation of Trump’s populism is simply to make sense of the volume of material, separating a grandiose tweet from a meaningful administrative change. What would be extraordinary in any other administration – a senior career official making allegations of serious wrongdoing against the President for example– has become routine. The other challenge is separating broader patterns of democratic backsliding from those of the Trump administration. As we shall see, the erosion of public sector institutions did not start with Trump; many were already in place, though not previously exploited by a leader with such clear authoritarian tendencies. The Trump administration has pursued democratic backsliding with greatest effects in the politicization of personnel and norms, and an evasion of traditional mechanisms of traditional accountability.

These tendencies, and the costs that they raise, are illustrated in two min case studies examined here: President Trump’s impeachment process, and a botched response to COVID-19. The chapter concludes by discussing how the intense polarization of the US electorate provides a protective shield for the Trump administration. This raises perhaps the most worrying aspect of the US case: democratic backsliding is largely understood through a partisan perspective, with one party largely the author of such backsliding, and with its backers largely indifferent or supportive of the process. It becomes hard to see how a polarized electorate can break this cycle.

Patterns of Backsliding

How do we recognize democratic backsliding in the context of public administration? Bauer and Becker (2020) identify centralization of structure and resources, and politicization of personnel or norms, and evasion of accountability as key indicators (see also the introduction of this volume).

Table 1 previews how the Trump administration stacks up in terms of the five criteria of backsliding in public administration. It also seeks to reflect that such tendencies have been long part of the US federal government. Indeed, one aspect of US exceptionalism is populist suspicion of the federal bureaucracy, which was evident even in the origins of the state. One of the chief criticisms of Alexander Hamilton by his Republican rivals was that he was creating an army of federal bureaucrats. President Andrew Jackson heralded the spoils system as a way to prevent a permanent class of bureaucrats. The introduction of the civil service system at the end of the 19th century tempered this pattern, and for much of the 20th century, good government advocates succeeded in expanding investments in expertise and neutrality by giving federal employees more protections (Gailmaird and Patty 2013).

Whatever consensus existed about the role of the administrative state in supporting democracy, it was an American one. The career civil service grew partly by Presidents expanding career status protections to their appointees, while still retaining a small army of political appointees to help them run the government (Ingraham 1995). The “paranoid style” of American politics framed federal bureaucrats as part of the ruling elite, as evidenced by McCarthyite attacks on career civil servants as Communists during the 1950s (Hofstader 2012).

In the decades that followed, the parties moved further apart in their evaluation of the career public service. The Nixon administration undertook a campaign of political control of career bureaucrats, aspects of which would be repeated by future Presidents, but used most aggressively by Republicans and taken to a new level by Trump. Nixon and his successors overriding concern was that federal bureaucrats were self-interested, intent of protecting their programs, unresponsive to any leader seeking change, and in particular, to conservative Presidents seeking to reshape and reduce the administrative state (Moynihan and Roberts 2010).

For scholarship, trends in research followed suit to some degree. The applications of principal agent theory that emerged, for example, began with assumptions of agent misbehavior, but offered little concern about the motives of the principal (Niskanen 1971; Moe 1985). Some research documented the tensions between bureaucrats and their political masters during the Reagan (Durant 1992; O’ Leary 2006) and Bush administrations (Lewis, 2008; Moynihan and Roberts 2010; Resh 2015), calling into the question the costs of a more politicized presidency in terms of agency effectiveness. Articulations of the American state that emphasized the role of bureaucracy as a democratic safeguard (e.g. Rohr 1986) fell out of fashion in both public administration and political science.

Centralizing Control

The Nixonian model for Presidential control took two main forms (Moynihan and Roberts 2010). One was centralization of policymaking, the other was control of personnel. The first approach fits well with Bauer and Becker’s (2020) strategy of centralizing structures. The White House, rather than individual agencies where career staff held sway, became the heart of new policymaking from the Nixon administration on. In this, the Trump administration was similar to past administrations, but with one obvious difference. Members of the White House inner circle included the President’s own family, and others with little experience in, and much skepticism of, government. At various times, the President’s son-in-law was tasked with leading initiatives addressing the opioid epidemic, diplomatic relations with Mexico and China, criminal justice reform, Middle East peace, and a shadow COVID-19 task force, and overall government reforms, where he promised to make the federal government “run like a great American company.”

While past President’s had drawn on “kitchen cabinets” of informal advisers, the quality of those advisers and their roles were different under Trump. Three members of Trump’s private Mar-A-Lago club were given extraordinary influence over the Department of Veteran’s Affairs, the largest federal agency in terms of employees, to the point that they helped to push out its Secretary (Arnsdorf 2018). The President directed his private lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, to represent him to foreign governments, which partly precipitated his later impeachment. Trump avidly watched and consulted with conservative television commentators, with a revolving door between the White House and its most vocal media defender, Fox News, that sometimes resembled a state-controlled propaganda outlet (Mayer 2019).

The centralization of resource allocation that Bauer and Becker (2020) identify fits less well with the US context, given the separation of powers in the budget process. As many Presidents have learned, Congress jealously guards the power of the purse. For example, President George W. Bush proposed redesigning the federal budget around performance goals, but met firm opposition even with a Republican Congress (Moynihan 2013). Similarly, Trump has proposed large cuts in his proposed budget, leading to the unusual sight of agency heads explaining to Congressional appropriation committees that they need less money. But the President’s budget proposal is just a proposal, with limited influence on actual budget decisions. The President does have some powers in budget execution. As detailed below, Trump’s has abused those powers, resisting Congressional controls. In the context of the impeachment process, efforts to centralize resources backfired by moving the White House into the realm if illegality, but the standard of a powerful President exerting tight policy and resource control dates back to Nixon, with similar skirting of the law.

Politicization of Personnel

The second form of control pursued by prior Presidents was closer political control of the bureaucracy. Here, the Trump administration again extends past patterns, moving beyond the norms of past Presidents to a considerable degree.

The United States is unusual in the prevalence and power of non-career political appointees. The reliance on about 4,000 appointees is partly the historical echo of the spoils system, when government positions were effectively treated as the property of political parties, and a partly reflects a conservative suspicion of bureaucrats, and with it an abiding belief that the President needs his own people. This philosophy reached an apotheosis under Trump, who sees the career civil service as “the deep state” permanently plotting his demise.

It is easy to think of politicization of personnel as occurring on one dimension: the neutral expert is replaced with someone selected on the basis of political loyalty. The degree to which that loyalty matters in selection, the greater the politicization. If political appointees offer responsiveness to elected officials through their loyalty, this responsiveness comes at a cost. The best evidence we have is that appointees generate poorer organizational performance relative to career officials (Lewis 2007). On this dimension, the Trump administration has assuredly become more politicized. Many experienced Republicans were reluctant to work for him given his volatility and character (Rein and Philip 2017). The administration relied heavily on political loyalists who often had little interest in or knowledge about their job, or lobbyists looking out for clients (Lewis 2018). To an unprecedented degree, senior leaders appointed to agencies expressed suspicion or outright hostility to elements of their agency’s mission in a vast array of policy areas, including environmental, energy and federal land regulation, public education, housing, health and social programs.

There are two other relevant criteria to politicization that effects the quality of government and seem especially relevant under populist regimes. The first is what we might call depth. The Trump administration simply does not have enough qualified players to field a full team. The second criterion is stability. The expert is generally assumed to be a career official, with job security that allows them to last from one administration to the next. The appointee is less secure, since they serve at the pleasure of the President. In the best-case scenario, the timeline for an appointee in the US is usually 18-24 months. In the Trump administration, turnover is higher. Trump expressed a stated preference for temporary appointees, has removed many key officials, and in some cases proposed nominees who will not be approved by the Senate. Four out of five senior White House positions have turned over during the Trump presidency, and one-third were still vacant even by 2020 (Steinhauer and Kanno-Youngs 2020).

Such temporary leaders cannot establish medium-term goals, make credible commitments or offer a vision for the direction of their agency. They have all of the credibility of a substitute teacher. By one calculation, for the most senior Cabinet level jobs have been filled by “acting” officials one-ninth of the time, about three times the rate of the prior Obama administration (Blake 2020).

One implication of the lack of depth is tied to the lack of stability, which is the role of career officials in filling out leadership positions. Presidents tend to concentrate their most qualified appointees in high profile agencies, policy settings where they want to make an impact, or agencies they distrust (Lewis 2008). In agencies lacking these characteristics, it is more likely that career officials are left in senior positions of leadership. This may seem to provide a protection against democratic backsliding, and perhaps is better than the counterfactual. But the US system is designed to work with political appointees in place. For example, the Federal Vacancies Act of 1998 allows career officials to step into political appointee leadership roles normally subject to confirmation of the Senate, but limits the number of days that an official can hold a senior position as “acting” leader to less than a year. And so, the instability of the system continues even when career officials are designated as leaders.

These aspects of politicization – expertise, depth, and stability – have combined, resulting in a shambolic outcome, both in terms of a more politicized personnel and performance. In other areas Trump has undermined federal employee protections. In terms of legislature, Congress passed the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act in 2017, which weakened employee protections in the largest federal agency, making it easier to fire them and harder for employees to appeal disciplinary actions. At the same time, Trump has offered no serious attempt to legislate governmentwide civil service reform. A proposal to eliminate the governmentwide human resource agency, the Office of Personnel Management, was rebuffed by Congress. In part, this is because the White House generally lacks policy entrepreneurs that could turn such ideas into legislation, reflected in Trump’s generally poor legislative record.

The irony of Trump’s legislative failures is that he turned to the very administrative state that he has denounced. A huge proportion of his more significant policy goals – in immigration, regulatory and welfare policy areas for example – have been pursued via executive orders and the rulemaking process.

Such administrative tools have also been used for public administration policy changes. Trump signed Executive Order 13839 in 2018: Promoting Accountability and Streamlining Removal Procedures Consistent with Merit System Principles, which set up a broader governmentwide framework to make it easier to fire and discipline career employees. He has pursued a broad battle against public sector unions. One rule allows federal employees to opt out of paying their union dues, a strategy which had elsewhere been used by Republican governors to significantly weaken public unions in their states. As far back as 2017, White House officials mapped out the goal of decertifying such unions as a way of undercutting the “left-wing ideologues” who run them (Kullgren 2019). In January of 2020, President Trump proposed eliminating collective bargaining in the Department of Defense, creating the potential to remove bargaining rights from 500,000 federal employees. This pattern again echoed the past. The Bush administration had similarly sought to remove collective bargaining rights from Department of Homeland Security employees when it was created (Moynihan 2005).

For federal employees, there are obvious concerns about how weakening bargaining rights will hurt their pocketbook. In his proposed budgets, Trump has sought to make employees pay more toward their benefits and limit pay raises. There are broader concerns not just about whether such cuts undermine the ability of the federal government to recruit and retain talent, but also about the potential for a less-protected federal workforce to be more subject to politicization. Unions are not perfect, but they offer one organized form of resistance against politicization, and have been willing protest the Trump administration’s efforts in those areas. Stripped of their bargaining rights, they become less relevant, and less able to defend their members from politicization.

#### An unprotected civil service unleashes “the biggest portfolio of catastrophic risks ever.”

Loren DeJonge Shulman 22. Lecturer of international affairs at George Washington University, M.P.P. from the University of Minnesota, "Schedule F: An Unwelcome Resurgence." Lawfare. 8/12/2022. lawfaremedia.org/article/schedule-f-unwelcome-resurgence

Best-Case Scenario: Weakening the Civil Service Risk Management Role

Over 2 million career civil servants working across dozens of large and small agencies are hired under the competitive service process. More than 70 percent work in national security-oriented agencies, such as the Defense Department, the State Department, the Treasury Department, and the Energy Department. Many more work in technical, administrative, policy, and legal roles. They do work that often results in news that makes headlines—negotiating sanctions policies, advising on the legality of drone strikes overseas, maintaining relationships with allies and partners, preparing procedures and resources for future pandemic response—and a great deal more behind the scenes that may end up on a cabinet secretary’s or president’s desk for consideration.

Author Michael Lewis describes civil servants’ responsibilities in the “The Fifth Risk,” calling the U.S government the manager of “the biggest portfolio of [catastrophic] risks ever managed by a single institution in the history of the world.” Some are obvious—the threat of nuclear attacks, for example—but most are glacial and opaque, demanding a portfolio of reliable and steady risk managers who can prioritize the nation’s security without fearing for their job security.

Thousands of such “risk managers” who work in policy-adjacent roles would be implicated by a Schedule F policy that removes the civil service protections set out for them in the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. Civil servants today are protected against possible political retaliation, coercion, or removal by presidents and political appointees. They must be hired on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills, using fair evaluation metrics. And they are protected against reprisal for whistleblowing.

These rules are frequently shorthanded derisively in (false) assumptions that civil servants cannot be fired. To the contrary, there are set guidelines for when federal employees can be lawfully terminated and disciplined based on performance or misconduct. The antiquated federal hiring process faces similar—albeit fairer—criticism, but its slowness is intended to screen for those who have “a high standard of integrity and trust to promote the interests of the public” and for good reason. Overall, these critiques misunderstand that the competitive hiring process and subsequent protections are what make it possible for civil servants to perform exceptionally, particularly in high pressure, complex policy areas where the government is managing extreme risk on behalf of the country, such as national security.

By protecting them from political reprisal, these rules give civil servants in policy roles the foundation to offer advice that may be tough for presidents to hear, to execute policies with high stakes, to report illegal activity and misconduct as a part of their duties, and to trust that they and their peers owe their first fealty to protecting and defending the Constitution. They do all of this with the confidence that their integrity will be rewarded and protected.

At best, shifting policy-aligned roles to Schedule F roles would have a chilling effect on such policy experts whom we rely on for their unique expertise, candor, and integrity, potentially making them more cautious about the advice they give, the portfolios they support, the risks they take in defending the Constitution, and their willingness to call out malfeasance or bad news.

Worst-Case Scenario: Harming National Security

At its worst, Schedule F will make it possible for presidents to remove thousands of experts who make U.S. global leadership possible. By shifting protected civil servants to at-will employees, Schedule F makes it possible to fire them without the due process currently owed to civil servants. In other words, civil servants could be fired for any reason at all—for giving unwelcome advice, for prior jobs, for being the subject of unsubstantiated accusations of any type, for perceptions of partisan affiliation, or simply for being in a role the president wishes to open up for a loyalist.

Some Schedule F advocates make clear that large-scale removals are under consideration and that removal, not oversight, is their ultimate goal for Schedule F. “Fire everyone you’re allowed to fire,” one commented, according to the Axios reporting. “And [then] fire a few people you’re not supposed to, so that they have to sue you and you send the message.”

Because the policy would also allow replacement of current civil servants without a competitive process, replacements for nonpartisan civil servants could be made without regard to qualification and suitability, or based on partisan affiliation, creating a new kind of political appointee.

The potential loss of talent could be wide and extremely damaging. Axios also reported that, according to sources close to Trump, the former president intends to “go after” the national security establishment as a matter of “top priority,” including those in the intelligence community and State Department. Policy roles that could be reclassified as Schedule F could cut across many high-import areas: Russian defense strategy, Iranian nuclear programs, or Chinese regional security capabilities, among hundreds of other categories. The harm to national security of removing and replacing civil servants—whose work, as we have established, requires expertise, relationships, and clear understanding of risk—with individuals with no required qualification except loyalty to a single individual is self-evident.

But, should a future president pursue this action, beyond missing an endless list of risk portfolio managers, the United States will miss something more fundamental to its success and security: its reliability. American alliances are valuable because of the steady undercurrent of the nation’s civil servants who maintain networks, expertise, and consistency regardless of who inhabits the Oval Office. Despite its turmoil, the American political system is a strong model and international interlocutor because its civil servants serve expertly and well across presidential administrations of any political affiliation. Schedule F, by stifling or removing long-serving civil servants, would make the United States a weaker, less reliable, and less trusted partner.

Why Shouldn’t the President Get a Say?

A president’s desire to shape a policy team, and to be sure it is filled with strong performers who are closely aligned with their views, is understandable. After all, presidents are elected to implement their chosen policy agenda, and having a team around them who can work in support is critical. But presidents already can wield enormous influence over both their closest policy advisers and the most far-flung agency overseers: through the 4,000 political appointees who are named, or removed, at the pleasure of the president. The Schedule F proposal would be an enormous and unnecessary expansion of this already poorly utilized system.

Most administrations never come close to seeing all those politically appointed policy roles filled despite the tremendous access and leverage such appointments bring them. And some presidential teams still struggle to make best use of political appointee and career civil servant partnerships. Rather than adding more chaos and instability with a Schedule F policy, administrations could be maximizing the opportunity that comes with leveraging their career and political leaders together. As noted in a recent Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group report:

Career executives bring program and policy expertise from their long familiarity with their agencies which can help them manage programs better and work more effectively with external stakeholders and inside actors. Politically appointed leaders can bring energy, risk-taking and responsiveness into an agency’s decision-making process which can improve performance. When leaders are matched with missions, agendas and teams that align with their distinct approaches and perspectives, they can find success in creating a government that is more efficient, innovative and responsive to the needs of the public.

The civil service system is not perfect. The pay system has its origins in World War II. The hiring process, though well-intended, is glacial. The permeability of the system in an era that requires close understanding and collaboration across sectors is limited. But the fundamentals are powerful, and they serve as a critical ingredient to the success of the United States’ global leadership and the sustainability of its democracy.

The U.S. government is able to take on high-risk, high-cost ventures—nuclear security, pandemic response, environmental clean-up, food safety, and more—because civil servants are hired based on qualifications, not party affiliation; give advice based on data and integrity, not fear of reprisal; and owe allegiance to the Constitution, not the president. It needs to stay that way.

#### And guarantees that the cumulative effect of multiple risks is extinction.

Henry Farrell 25. Professor of international affairs at Johns Hopkins University, Ph.D. in government from Georgetown University. "When the polycrisis hits the omnishambles, what comes next?" Programmable Mutter. 2-21-2025. programmablemutter.com/p/when-the-polycrisis-hits-the-omnishambles

A couple of years ago, on my now deleted Twitter account, I had a brief joking dialogue with Adam Tooze, about the concept of polycrisis, which he didn’t invent but has popularized. Adam explains the polycrisis as a concatenation of big problems - e.g. climate change; the crisis of democracy; global migration - that not only hit simultaneously but plausibly make each other worse. I pointed to another neologism, the “omnishambles” (from Arnaldo Ianucci’s dark comedy, The Thick of It - Wikipedia definition), describing governmental situations in which no-one has any idea what is going on or what to do, and policy-making is utterly shambolic and fucked up. By construction, I suggested, there must be such things as the polyshambles and omnicrisis.

It wasn’t a very good joke, but I think that there is a useful intuition behind it, which is worth turning into an entirely unfunny diagnosis. We are in a world where our problems are getting bigger, and are feeding on each other. Those of us who live in the U.S. are at the beginning of a sudden and dramatic worsening of the quality of government policy making. In other words, we are about to see a collision between the polycrisis and the omnishambles. So how do we think about this collision usefully?

From this perspective, both Paul’s post, and our op-ed map specific pieces of a larger and more complex problem. And when I use the term ‘complex,’ I use it advisedly. The polycrisis is a simplified way of talking about the world as a complex system. In Scott Page’s description, a “complex system consists of diverse entities that interact in a network or contact structure.” In less academic language, it is a larger system composed of smaller sub-systems that interact with each other. Even when these sub-systems are relatively simple, the whole may be complex and unpredictable. And when they are themselves complex …

This way of thinking about the world helps clarify what the polycrisis involves. Complex interactions may give rise to positive feedback loops, in which different parts of the system reinforce each other so as to induce instability. To apply this to the polycrisis, think crudely of how climate change may increase the likelihood of large scale migration across borders, leading to crises of democracy and government legitimacy, which in turn makes governments less capable of regulating the economic activities that make climate change worse. But complex systems may also give rise to homeostasis, in which some parts of the system become adaptive, perhaps dampening down positive feedback loops and responding dynamically to unexpected changes in the environment.

One of Paul’s early books builds on these ideas (although he later became skeptical, since they are notably better at describing the phenomenon than predicting how it will unfold, let alone providing precise guidance on what to do about it). Indeed, the Minsky cycle is exactly an example of how government may act to limit the likelihood of positive feedback loops getting out of hand. Without regulation, irrational exuberance feeds upon itself and the behaviors it induces. The role of the Federal Reserve, famously, is to order “the punch bowl removed just when the party [is] really warming up.”

Behind Paul’s post - and our piece - lies a possible understanding of the larger situation we face. In good times, we have an environment in which the problems are not too big, or can be dealt with one by one, or, ideally, both things are true at once. We have a government that is capable of dealing with them, acting as a kind of homeostatic regulator, which dampens down the possible chaos without, and perhaps even takes advantage of the unexpected possibilities it provides (while avoiding eviscerating the dynamical aspects of the economy - one can absolutely have too much government).

We are not in those good times. Instead, we are in an increasingly unpredictable environment with multiple major problems reinforcing each other in complex ways (the polycrisis). At much the same time, the most significant government in the world is absolutely not acting as a homeostatic regulator. Instead, of dampening down the chaos, it is accelerating it, while ripping out large swathes of the administrative apparatus that potentially allow it to understand the environment and influence it.

Trump’s second term is going to be the apotheosis of the omnishambles. And it is potentially even grimmer than that. In an ideal world, there is at least a second order feedback loop such that bigger problems leads to better government and the expansion of capacity for government to deal with these problems in conjunction with other modes of problem solving (markets; democracy). In the world we are in right now, there seems to be just the opposite set of feedbacks. Bigger problems are not leading to better government in the U.S. and elsewhere, but to worse.

As noted already, complexity theory is much better at describing problems like this than at predicting how they will turn out, let alone solving them. But it at least provides a framework for seeing how the different sub-systems might interact together.

The crises we are likely to face in Trump’s second term are not simply going to be crises of financial regulation, or of tariffs, or of withdrawn security guarantees, or breakdowns of scientific knowledge, or loss of capacity to respond to emergencies. They are likely, instead to involve the interactions of two or more of these factors with each other, and with the pre-existing problems of the polycrisis. Mapping out - even crudely - the relationships between these different sub-systems will help us be better prepared for what happens, even if we cannot fully anticipate it.

#### Small mistakes cascade. Our internal link is about expertise, not policymaking authority.

Peter Earle 26. Director of economics and senior economist at the American Institute for Economic Research, Ph.D. in economics from the University of Angers, M.A. in economics from American University. "Expertise Remains Indispensable." American Thinker. 1-1-2026. americanthinker.com/articles/2026/01/expertise\_remains\_indispensable.html

Indeed, even the loudest critics of what’s sloppily been called “credentialism” quietly rely on it every day. Few people are interested in performing their own surgery or putting it in the hands of the Domino's Pizza deliveryman (who may fancy himself a “polymath” — another word which has strayed from its original meaning). And even if I know, roughly, how to fix a glitching electrical panel, I’m likely to leave that to people who do it daily. Amid the churlish cry of generalism-for-all, we continue to trust surgeons to operate, airline pilots to fly, structural engineers to calculate loads, anesthesiologists to manage unconsciousness, and specialized mechanics to keep complex machines from failing at speed. We do so not because these professionals are infallible, but because long training, apprenticeship, and error correction still matter in a world of growing, unforgiving complexity.

Modern systems — technological, economic, social/cultural — are far from intuitive. They are tightly coupled, layered, and increasingly nonlinear. Small mistakes can cascade. (Ask any actuary.) Partial understanding is nearly always more dangerous than ignorance when it encourages confident intervention without awareness of second- and third-order effects. That’s precisely why expertise developed in the first place—not to exclude the public, but to reduce error in domains where error is costly.

Ironically, errors within expert communities tend to fail slowly and visibly: they’re constrained by peer review, professional norms, and reputational risk. Popular error, by contrast, fails quickly and at scale. When decisions are driven by self-important narrative, identity politics, or viral consensus rather than disciplined analysis or hard-won experience, corrections come late — often only after damage has already been done. History suggests that major disasters are more often born of mass enthusiasm and political shortcuts than of excessive technical caution.

None of this, of course, implies blind deference. Expertise should inform decisions, not dictate values. Specialists are good at explaining constraints, tradeoffs, probabilities, and risks: not at deciding collective goals. Much of the public backlash of recent years stems from role confusion, when technical advice was presented as moral certainty or political necessity. The remedy for that failure is not an infantile screed to abandon expertise, but to restore its proper boundaries.

Throwing away accumulated knowledge does not empower citizens; it forces complex choices to be made by guesses, intuition, tribal loyalty, or rhetorical force. Societies that do this do not become freer or wiser. They become more fragile.

The lesson of the past few years is not that expertise is obsolete or, in and of itself, dangerous. It is that expertise, severed from humility and institutional restraint, can be misused and even weaponized. The correct response is accountability, not a ridiculous fantasy that we can replace hard-won competence with a disingenuous generalism, confidence, and crowd wisdom. Civilization does not advance by pretending everyone is equally qualified to do everything. It advances by recognizing that specialization, while imperfect, remains indispensable — and that abandoning it is not liberation, and hardly progress, but self-inflicted blindness.

#### Weak administrative capacity invites terrorism.

Timothy Snyder 25. Professor of history at Yale University, Ph.D. in modern history from the University of Oxford. "The Next Terrorist Attack." Thinking About... 11-1-2025. snyder.substack.com/p/the-next-terrorist-attack-26b

The rank and file of the critical institutions are subjected to administrative hostility and chaos. The names of active CIA officers have been sent on open emails to the White House, and in a Signal chat in which a reporter was included. CIA employees have been urged to take early retirement. CIA officers involved in any way in diversity recruitment have been fired (a judge has blocked this, for the time being).

FBI special agents have been exposed to similar indignities. Top FBI officials have been pressured to resign and have done so. The Trump administration is pursuing FBI special agents who were involved in prosecutions of people who stormed the Capitol on January 6th 2021.

These people run national security, intelligence, and law enforcement like a television show. A media strategy does not stop actual terrorists. It summons them.

Terrorism is a real risk in the real world. The constant use of the word to denote unreal threats creates unreality. And unreality inside key institutions degrades capability. Security agencies that have been trained to follow political instructions about imaginary threats do not investigate actual threats. Fiction is dangerous. Treating the administration’s abduction of a legal permanent resident as a heroic defense against terror is not only mendacious and unconstitutional but also dangerous.

This administration makes the United States look vulnerable. Americans under the spell of Trump’s charisma might imagine that strength is being projected. Not so. To prospective terrorists we look erratic and weak. Even apparently unrelated policies — such as enabling foreign disinformation, gutting environmental protection, undoing weather forecasting, ending food inspections, and undermining disease control — make life easier for terrorists and open avenues of attack. By taking apart the government, crashing the economy, and dividing the population, Musk and Trump invite attention of the worst sort, from people who wish to hurt Americans.

Who are such people? Three possible groups of perpetrators of a major terrorist attack in the United States are native right-wing nationalists or white supremacists (“domestic violent extremists”), Islamicists, and Russians.

#### Counterterror expertise staves off global war.

Colin Clarke & Christopher Costa 25. Director of research at the Soufan Group, Ph.D. in international security policy from the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. Adjunct associate professor of at Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies, former special assistant to the President and senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council. "Terrorism Means Something Different Now." Foreign Policy. 6-25-2025. foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/25/counter-terrorism-iran-united-states

Yet within the counterterrorism community, personnel and funding have been drastically reduced, including by the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE. Resources have been shifted away from the counterterrorism mission, and replacing a generation of analysts and operators with indispensable expertise simply will not be possible.

The firewall between violent nonstate actors and conventional, state-based warfare is also highly permeable. Twice in the last two years, it has been a terrorist attack that has brought two nation-states to the brink of all-out conflict with one another. First, the Hamas terrorist attack of Oct. 7, 2023, catalyzed an open-ended conflagration between Israel and members of Iran’s so-called axis of resistance, a proxy network that includes not just Hamas, but also Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Lebanese Hezbollah, various Iraqi Shiite militias, and the Houthis in Yemen.

And in late April of this year, a terrorist attack launched by a group affiliated with Lashkar-e-Taiba brought two nuclear-armed rivals—India and Pakistan—to the brink of conflict on the Indian subcontinent. Terrorism has the power to draw in some of the largest militaries in the world and pit them against one another.

There is deep historical precedent here. After all, it was the targeted assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo that sparked the earliest stages of what would escalate into World War I. However, it is not 1914 all over again. Unlike 1914, the 21st-century NATO alliance is not sleepwalking into a NATO-Russia conflagration over Ukraine. Rather, it is awakened to these threats. Still, how NATO and the United States contend with Russia remains an urgent task and may determine what kind of global order will exist for the rest of the 21st century. Western powers recognize the threats across Europe—sabotage, arson, cyberattacks, and disinformation—as part of an escalating campaign of hybrid activities.

Accordingly, it is not just countries like Iran, but also Russia, that pose major state-sponsored terror threats to the West. If a state-sponsored terrorist attack emanating from the Kremlin led to the downing of a cargo plane from or over NATO territory, could that lead to a broader war? Almost certainly, and it remains an issue that many European countries are concerned about.

During his campaign for president, George W. Bush ran on a platform of domestic policy, particularly focused on education and poverty reduction. But the 9/11 attacks transformed his presidency overnight, and Bush was soon overwhelmed with the complexities of nation-building and counterinsurgency in failed states after sending the U.S. military to Afghanistan, and then Iraq.

Today the United States faces a range of terrorism threats, including from domestic actors motivated by a litany of grievances, including anti-government extremism. The old threats still remain, albeit in slightly hybridized form. The core organizations of al Qaeda and the Islamic State have been smashed, but the offshoots and branches of these groups remain potent. Any number of transnational terrorist groups likely have the will and capability to strike the U.S. homeland in some manner, including al-Shabaab, Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan, and Hezbollah, to name just a few.

The threat from al Qaeda offshoots in particular continues to linger, as evidenced earlier this month when Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested a Tajikistan-born Russian national in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with ties to the organization.

Just this year alone, there have been a number of arrests in the United States pertaining to the Islamic State and support for the group. In February, an individual living in Brooklyn, New York, was arrested for conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State and IS-K. In April, an Afghan native living in Oklahoma pleaded guilty to an attack he had planned on Election Day last November, on behalf of the Islamic State. And in May, a former member of the Michigan Army National Guard was arrested for planning to attack a U.S. military base, also on behalf of the group.

These attacks were thwarted, but imagine the second- and third-order effects of a mass casualty terror attack in a major American city targeting civilians. In such a worst-case scenario, if links to a state sponsor were uncovered, it could trigger escalation and lead the United States into war, depending on the nature and severity of the attack. As uncomfortable as it is to envision such scenarios, it is the inability or unwillingness to grapple with such possibilities that led to the failure of imagination surrounding 9/11.

If all politics is local, as former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill was fond of saying, then the modern-day corollary to this adage is that all conflict is global. What happens in Kyiv or Khan Younis can impact the threat landscape from Melbourne to Montreal. One of the deleterious consequences of globalization, especially the advances in information technology and real-time communications, has been a shrinking of the battle space. Inevitably, conflict spills over borders and frequently manifests in the form of terrorism.

Lastly, there are a range of ominous and unconventional emerging-threat undercurrents percolating just beneath the surface. This is perhaps most evident in the recent arrest of two Chinese nationals charged with smuggling potential agroterrorism fungus into the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Any kind of spectacular attack, either against U.S. food and or water security, or involving the use of weapons of mass destruction, could commandeer the mandate of the broader U.S. national security establishment, which would then seek to reconstitute a robust counterterrorism capability after the fact. Thus, the accidental power of terrorism is that it is a universal spoiler of a well-intended policy agenda.

Emerging technologies have lowered the barriers to entry for would-be terrorists. These tools, including drones, 3-D printing, virtual currencies, artificial intelligence, and encryption, have become force multipliers for violent nonstate actors and may very well be an unintentional accelerant for a global war.

#### Independently, bargaining rights prevent the mass exodus of experienced diplomats.

Michele Kelemen 25. M.A. in Russian and East European Affairs and international economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. "Veteran diplomats react to the Trump administration gutting the lead U.S. aid agency." NPR. 4/14/2025. npr.org/2025/04/14/nx-s1-5357431/veteran-diplomats-react-to-the-trump-administration-gutting-the-lead-u-s-aid-agency

Trump administration reforms at the State Department are shrinking the United States' diplomatic footprint globally.

AILSA CHANG, HOST:

Quote, "unjustified seismic shift" in the U.S. foreign policy enterprise - that is how some Democrats are describing the reforms taking place at the State Department. The Trump administration has already gutted the lead U.S. aid agency, and the remnants will now be absorbed by the State Department, which is also facing cutbacks. As NPR's Michele Kelemen reports, all of this has veteran diplomats worried.

MICHELE KELEMEN, BYLINE: For a hundred years, the American Foreign Service Association has supported U.S. diplomats at home and around the world. The Trump administration has stripped it of its collective bargaining rights with the State Department, something AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi is now fighting in court.

TOM YAZDGERDI: Without collective bargaining rights, any major initiatives, say, on assignments or promotions, we no longer have eyes on. That's not only bad for our members, I think it's bad for the Foreign Service.

KELEMEN: But it's not only the union's troubles that worry Yazdgerdi, a veteran Foreign Service officer. He says it's important for the U.S. to have a professional, nonpartisan Foreign Service to help Americans overseas promote American businesses and carry out the policy of the president. But right now, he's seeing a lot of talent leaving.

YAZDGERDI: We have more people who have retired in the first 2 1/2 months of this year than in all of last year, so it's on pace to be a record year. And that's unfortunate because I think we want to also maintain, you know, that senior experience and knowledge. Mentorship is a huge thing in the Foreign Service. We might be losing some of that if we just see a run for the door from our senior Foreign Service members.

KELEMEN: The State Department has canceled summer internships. There's a hiring freeze and talk of closing a couple dozen diplomatic posts, including embassies and consulates. Retired Ambassador Ronald Neumann of the American Academy of Diplomacy says these kind of cuts can be done smartly.

RONALD NEUMANN: There's an intelligent way to reduce the size of the overseas footprint. But you can also do it stupidly.

KELEMEN: And what he's seen so far from the Trump administration gives him pause - that includes the dismantlement of USAID and a more recent decision to put a junior Foreign Service officer in charge of the State Department's Bureau of Global Talent.

NEUMANN: This is like, say, taking a second lieutenant and saying, OK, you should be chief of staff for the Army.

KELEMEN: The State Department would not comment on personnel matters related to Lew Olowski, a lawyer and Trump loyalist who joined the Foreign Service four years ago. He's now acting as the top official in a bureau usually run by a veteran diplomat confirmed by the Senate. Senator Chris Van Hollen, the ranking Democrat on a foreign relations subcommittee overseeing the department, is alarmed.

CHRIS VAN HOLLEN: Another very alarming proposal would be to replace experienced, knowledgeable career Foreign Service officers with political hacks.

KELEMEN: Van Hollen and other Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have written to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who used to be one of their Republican colleagues on the committee.

VAN HOLLEN: Rubio has been pretty much AWOL. I will say that the, you know, Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have not been exercising their oversight responsibilities.

KELEMEN: Republican Chairman Jim Risch has, so far, backed the changes the Trump administration is making, saying he did not want USAID to survive. But he says he does plan to have Rubio appear before the committee at some point to talk about the reforms. Van Hollen says things are moving too quickly, and America's soft power institutions are suffering.

#### Extinction. Deft diplomacy checks nuclear war AND solves cooperation on every issue.

Michael Kimmage 25. Professor of history at the Catholic University of America, Ph.D. in United States studies from Harvard University. "The World Trump Wants." Foreign Affairs. March/April 2025. foreignaffairs.com/united-states/world-trump-wants-michael-kimmage

A Vision of War

In Trump’s first term, the international landscape was fairly calm. There were no major wars. Russia appeared to have been contained in Ukraine. The Middle East appeared to be entering a period of relative stability facilitated in part by the Trump administration’s Abraham Accords, a set of deals intended to enhance regional order. China appeared to be deterrable in Taiwan; it never came close to invading. And in deed if not always in word, Trump conducted himself as a typical Republican president. He increased U.S. defense commitments to Europe, welcoming two new countries into NATO. He struck no deals with Russia. He talked harshly about China, and he maneuvered for advantage in the Middle East.

But today, a major war rages in Europe, the Middle East is in disarray, and the old international system is in tatters. A confluence of factors might lead to disaster: the further erosion of rules and borders, the collision of disparate national-greatness enterprises supercharged by erratic leaders and by rapid-fire communication on social media, and the mounting desperation of medium-sized and smaller states, which resent the unchecked prerogatives of the great powers and feel imperiled by the consequences of international anarchy. A catastrophe is more likely to erupt in Ukraine than in Taiwan or the Middle East because the potential for world war and for nuclear war is greatest in Ukraine.

Even in the rules-based order, the integrity of borders has never been absolute—especially the borders of countries in Russia’s vicinity. But since the end of the Cold War, Europe and the United States have remained committed to the principle of territorial sovereignty. Their enormous investment in Ukraine honors a distinctive vision of European security: if borders can be altered by force, Europe, where borders have so often generated resentment, would descend into all-out war. Peace in Europe is possible only if borders are not easily adjustable. In his first term, Trump underscored the importance of territorial sovereignty, promising to build a “big, beautiful wall” along the U.S. border with Mexico. But in that first term, Trump did not have to contend with a major war in Europe. And it’s clear now that his belief in the sanctity of borders applies primarily to those of the United States.

China and India, meanwhile, have reservations about Russia’s war, but along with Brazil, the Philippines, and many other regional powers, they have made a far-reaching decision to retain their ties with Russia even as Putin labors away at destroying Ukraine. Ukrainian sovereignty is immaterial to these “neutral” countries, unimportant compared with the value of a stable Russia under Putin and with the value of continuing energy and arms deals.

These countries may underestimate the risks of accepting Russian revisionism, which could lead not to stability but to a wider war. The spectacle of a carved-up or defeated Ukraine would terrify Ukraine’s neighbors. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are NATO members that take comfort in NATO’s Article 5 commitment to mutual defense. Yet Article 5 is underwritten by the United States—and the United States is far away. If Poland and the Baltic republics concluded that Ukraine was on the brink of a defeat that would put their own sovereignty at risk, they might elect to join the fight directly. Russia might respond by taking the war to them. A similar outcome could result from a grand bargain among Washington, western European countries, and Moscow that ends the war on Russian terms but has a radicalizing effect on Ukraine’s neighbors. Fearing Russian aggression on the one hand and the abandonment of their allies on the other, they could go on the offensive. Even if the United States stayed on the sidelines amid a Europe-wide war, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom would probably not remain neutral.

Were the war in Ukraine to widen in that way, its outcome would greatly affect the reputations of Trump and Putin. Vanity would exert itself, as it so often does in international affairs. Just as Putin cannot afford to lose a war to Ukraine, Trump cannot afford to “lose” Europe. To squander the prosperity and power projection that the United States gains from its military presence in Europe would be humiliating for any American president. The psychological incentives for escalation would be strong. And in a highly personalistic international system, especially one agitated by undisciplined digital diplomacy, such a dynamic could take hold elsewhere. It could spark hostilities between China and India, perhaps, or between Russia and Turkey.

A Vision of Peace

Alongside such worst-case scenarios, consider how Trump’s second term could also improve a deteriorating international situation. A combination of workman like U.S. relations with Beijing and Moscow, a nimble approach to diplomacy in Washington, and a bit of strategic luck might not necessarily lead to major breakthroughs, but it could produce a better status quo. Not an end to the war in Ukraine, but a reduction in its intensity. Not a resolution of the Taiwan dilemma, but guardrails to prevent a major war in the Indo-Pacific. Not a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but some form of U.S. detente with a weakened Iran, and the emergence of a viable government in Syria. Trump might not become an unqualified peacemaker, but he could help usher in a less war-torn world.

Under Biden and his predecessors Barack Obama and George W. Bush, Russia and China had to cope with systemic pressure from Washington. Moscow and Beijing stood outside the liberal international order in part by choice and in part because they were not democracies. Russian and Chinese leaders exaggerated this pressure, as if regime change were actual U.S. policy, but they were not wrong to detect a preference in Washington for political pluralism, civil liberties, and the separation of powers.

With Trump back in office, that pressure has dissipated. The form of the governments in Russia and China does not preoccupy Trump, whose rejection of nation building and regime change is absolute. Even though the sources of tension remain, the overall atmosphere will be less fraught, and more diplomatic exchanges may be possible. There may be more give-and-take within the Beijing-Moscow-Washington triangle, more concessions on small points, and more openness to negotiation and to confidence-building measures in zones of war and contestation.

If Trump and his team can practice it, flexible diplomacy—the deft management of constant tensions and rolling conflicts—could pay big dividends. Trump is the least Wilsonian president since Woodrow Wilson himself. He has no use for overarching structures of international cooperation such as the UN or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Instead, he and his advisers, especially those who hail from the tech world, might approach the global stage with the mentality of a start-up, a company just formed and perhaps soon to be dissolved but able to react quickly and creatively to the conditions of the moment.

Ukraine will be an early test. Instead of pursuing a hasty peace, the Trump administration should stay focused on protecting Ukrainian sovereignty, which Putin will never accept. To allow Russia to curtail Ukraine’s sovereignty might provide a veneer of stability but could bring war in its wake. Instead of an illusory peace, Washington should help Ukraine determine the rules of engagement with Russia, and through these rules, the war could gradually be minimized. The United States would then be able to compartmentalize its relations with Russia, as it did with the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, agreeing to disagree about Ukraine while looking for possible points of agreement on nuclear nonproliferation, arms control, climate change, pandemics, counterterrorism, the Arctic, and space exploration. The compartmentalization of conflict with Russia would serve a core U.S. interest, one that is dear to Trump: the prevention of a nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia.

### Consolidation Adv---1AC

#### Advantage 2: CONSOLIDATION.

#### Federal workers are the canary in the coal mine. Protecting them caps authoritarian takeover.

Eric Blanc 25. Professor of labor studies at Rutgers University. "If Trump Crushes Federal Workers, We're All Next." The Nation. 2/19/2025. thenation.com/article/politics/trump-federal-workers-labor-rights

“I’m a federal worker, and I feel like a canary in the coal mine right now—because what they’re doing to us is going to happen to the entire American public.” That’s how Chris Dols, who works for the US Army Corps of Engineers and is the president of a local chapter of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, began his video response to Elon Musk’s instantly infamous Oval Office press conference last week.

Dols is right: Musk’s attacks on federal employees and their unions aren’t just a threat to the specific workers in his current line of fire. They pose an unparalleled danger to every single American.

Trump’s mission is simple: to exert authoritarian control over all branches of the federal government. To do that, he can’t merely fire the people at the top of government agencies. He needs workers at all levels of government who will put his wishes ahead of everything else, including the law. And to do that, he has to break the back of the federal employee labor movement.

That’s why Trump has unleashed Musk to take a wrecking ball to piece after piece of the government under the guise of trying to increase efficiency. The organized power of federal workers is the main obstacle to MAGA’s looting of public services and consolidation of authoritarian rule. The stronger they are, the harder it is for Trump to fully impose his agenda on American society.

Just as ominously, Trump and Musk are using these attacks to wage an ideological assault on the very principle of public services. Dols’s response to Musk expressed this clearly: “Everything public is under attack. The entire public sphere is under attack by a handful of billionaires behind Donald Trump.… Are you trying to do this for the American people, or are you trying to do this for your own gain? I get the feeling you didn’t become the richest person in the world by looking out for others.”

Nobody else is as well positioned as federal workers to halt this administration’s reactionary ambitions. Democratic leaders seem mostly interested in convincing their base that there’s nothing they can do. And while it’s still possible that the courts may pause or rein in some of Trump’s most egregious legal violations, we shouldn’t expect the Supreme Court, a third of which Trump appointed, to check his conduct in any significant way. Besides, courts move slowly. While waiting for legal edicts to come down, Musk can gain de facto control of the entire governmental apparatus, while doing everything possible to decimate public services.

But by refusing to quit, by refusing to comply with the power grab, and by making a compelling public case for the importance of their services, federal workers can throw a major wrench into Trump’s operations. And by taking their story to the American people through attention-grabbing fights like the day of action taking place across the country today, they can challenge Musk’s disgusting claims that they are “a parasite class.” Only federal workers can convince the American public that MAGA is threatening their Medicare, Social Security, health care, and education, as well as basic safety protections at work and beyond. The following point must be loudly, bluntly, and repeatedly hammered home to the American public: The new administration is threatening you and your family’s ability to get by, all for the benefit of a handful of corrupt billionaires.

Until we can show ordinary Americans that their immediate material interests are being hurt by Trump’s billionaire wrecking crew, the sad reality is that our side will continue to lose. Working-class Americans are not ready to rise up in defense of a political system that they rightly perceive has ignored them for decades.

What’s more, the federal workers’ fight has direct material stakes for all Americans—and this isn’t just because of the vital services they provide.

We’re already seeing the newly Trumpified National Labor Relations Board roll back a host of vital labor protections that workers gained during the Biden administration. If Musk is also able to illegally bust federal unions with little public outcry or broad labor fightback, already-emboldened bosses will take it as a sign that the gloves can fully come off. We saw in 1981 how President Reagan’s firing of striking federal PATCO air traffic controllers sparked an employer offensive in all industries and against all unions. The result? Union memberships plummeted, inequality skyrocketed, and ordinary people’s living standards stagnated. We’re still dealing with the damage today.

The task ahead is to convince nonunion workers that the fight of federal workers is also their fight. Trump is playing with fire, since, contrary to what he now claims, he was not elected with any mandate to decimate public services or unions. Indeed, the popularity of labor unions remains at historically high levels, even among Republicans. But workers outside of progressive echo chambers still need to be convinced that if Musk can terrorize federal employees into submission, every boss in the country will be tempted to run the same playbook: use brutal intimidation tactics and mass layoffs to dramatically cut their workforces, obliging those who remain to work more for less.

The new administration’s witch hunt against federal employees has left many scared to speak out, a hesitancy exacerbated by legal restrictions on civil service employees’ free speech. This fear can be overcome, as the administration’s attacks deepen, as a minority of federal workers begin speaking out, and once public opinion continues to shift against the new administration. Always attuned to his popularity, Trump is surely measuring the extent of pushback against Musk’s wrecking-ball operation. Trump’s main instinct is for self-preservation, not ideological crusading. That’s why if enough people turn against Musk, then there’s a good chance the president could throw him to the wolves.

But if there’s only mild resistance when the new administration attacks a big powerful opponent like federal unions, this will encourage deeper power grabs, further efforts to destroy public services, and even harsher attacks against those with fewer resources: immigrants, trans people, Palestine activists, and leftists.

#### Autocratic control of the bureaucracy makes miscalculation inevitable.

Tyler Jost 24. Watson Institute Assistant Professor of China Studies and political science at Brown University, former postdoctoral fellow at the Belfer Center International Security Program, Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University. "An Institutional Theory of Miscalculation." *Bureaucracies at War*, ch. 2, 21-38.

This chapter presents an institutional theory explaining why some leaders are more likely to miscalculate on the road to war. The central proposition is that leaders face a trade-off. They can design institutions that ensure they receive the best possible advice or they can design institutions that ensure the bureaucracy is powerless to threaten them.

This trade-off is discussed in two parts. The chapter first develops a simple theoretical framework describing how different national security institutions shape the availability of quality information to leaders. The framework identifies two dimensions along which these institutions vary: their capacity to search for information and the bureaucracy’s access to information elsewhere within the state. It argues that leaders are best positioned to avoid miscalculation when they possess integrated institutions that increase search capacity and permit wide inter-bureaucratic access to information.

The theory next turns to the question of why leaders adopt nonintegrated institutions. After all, why choose an institution that degrades judgment? The reason is that while integrated institutions offer informational benefits, they can also impose political costs. By motivating bureaucrats to develop expertise and granting access to information, integrated institutions empower bureaucrats to use their competence and access to punish the leader. Leaders thus face a trade-off between high-quality bureaucratic information and vulnerability to bureaucratic sanction. Leaders resolve this trade-off based on their political environment. As such, different leaders adopt different institutions at different times.

Leaders, Bureaucracy, and International Crises: A Theoretical Framework

Why do some states miscalculate more often than others as they choose to initiate international crises? To answer this question, we must begin by examining how states initiate crises in the first place. International crises are situations in which decision-makers perceive a time-sensitive threat to their interests and a heightened possibility of military hostility.1 They are the result of strategic choices made by states. More specifically, crises are the result of choices made by leaders – presidents, prime minister, dictators – who enjoy an outsized degree of authority in determining whether initiating an international crisis can achieve benefits at an acceptable cost.

Leaders make choices about crisis initiation in a purposeful manner. Namely, they weigh the benefits that they expect to reap from initiating a crisis against the costs that crisis will impose. All crises are gambles in which states struggle to show that they are willing to pay higher costs than their adversary to achieve their goals. On the one hand, international crises can advance the state’s interests. States may use international crises to seize territory, to improve the balance of power, or to compel adversaries to make bargaining concessions. On the other hand, crises can also impose costs. International crises that escalate to fighting on the battlefield inflict a human and economic toll, detracting from the state’s capacity to fight in the future and to provide economic benefits to society. Even in crises that do not escalate to violence, states pay costs to signal their willingness to fight if their demands are not met, whether through military mobilizations that drain state coffers or through public declarations that put the national honor on the line.

A leader’s choice for crisis initiation is informed by judgments and projections about the situation they face. That is, leaders consider how international confrontations are likely to end before they make the fateful decision to start them. The nature of international crises implies that three types of information are central to a leader’s choice. First, leaders need information about their strategic options, such as the different possible military and diplomatic strategies they might pursue. These include both the different strategies for which the leader can opt within a crisis, as well as the alternatives the state can pursue without triggering a crisis.

Second, leaders judge how costly potential crisis strategies will be relative to the strategies available apart from confrontation. Leaders presumably know the value that they assign to achieving their goals in a crisis. Yet leaders must project the countervailing costs that the crisis is likely to impose. Some crises require paying costs that exceed the leader’s limits. With perfect projections, leaders could choose to steer away from international confrontations in which the ultimate price exceed the amount the leader is willing to pay.

Finally, leaders judge the probable outcomes of the available strategies. That is, leaders project whether they are likely to be successful during the crisis and possible escalations to battlefield conflict, as well as whether such confrontations will translate into desired concessions from the adversary. With perfect projections about crisis outcomes, leaders can choose to avoid international crises in which the outcome does not advance the leader’s interests beyond the status quo.2

The Leader’s Informational Challenge

One of the central challenges that leaders face is that they lack complete information about the outcome and costs of initiating a crisis relative to other strategic alternatives available to the state.

Part of the leader’s informational challenge is structural in nature. Uncertainty pervades international politics generally and international crises specifically. Crisis outcomes depend not only on chance events that no leader can anticipate but also on complex strategic interactions with adversaries whose motives and future choices are never perfectly known.3 Adversaries obfuscate their capabilities, making it difficult to gauge the balance of power before international confrontations begin.4 As William Wohlforth summarizes, “many interpretations” of the balance of power are “always possible.”5 Similarly, leaders lack complete information about their adversaries’ resolve to resist the leader’s demands during crisis.6 That is, leaders do not know for sure the value that adversaries assign to territories or policies over which they are bargaining – and what costs they are willing to bear in order to get what they want.

Another part of the challenge stems from the leader’s human limitations. The structure of the international system does not preclude leaders from attempting to manage it as best they can by searching for information. Yet leaders are constrained in their ability to perform the time-intensive task of searching for information concerning their crisis prospects.7 As one report from the United Kingdom observes, leaders “cannot themselves be expected to be deep experts” on foreign and defense issues.8 One historian notes that even in the early twentieth century, Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph “found it impossible to master the oceans of information that came to his desk.”9 Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev once remarked that his ability to look out at the world from the Kremlin depended entirely on “the papers” that reached his desk.10 Even the available strategic options are often not immediately obvious to leaders.11 In the wake of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, for example, George H. W. Bush later admitted that he “had no idea what [U.S.] options were.”12 In short, information is costly for leaders to acquire.13

Constraints on information acquisition can cause leaders to miscalculate, which is defined as choosing a strategy based on an inaccurate proposition about the state of the world.14 In the context of international crisis, miscalculation refers to situations in which leaders initiate an international confrontation based on inaccurate beliefs about the expected outcome. For instance, leaders might initiate a conflict believing that their military enjoys an overwhelming numerical advantage in the number of troops deployed to the battlefield, when in fact the local balance of power is at parity. Similarly, leaders might start a crisis believing that their adversary will yield to their demands, when in fact the other state escalates the confrontation and imposes unanticipated costs.

Thus, the idea of miscalculation does not simply refer to the presence of uncertainty in the international system. Rather, the idea of miscalculation suggests that given the constraints of uncertainty, leaders sometimes derive beliefs that are at odds with the information available in the international system, information which a single leader cannot effectively collect and process on their own.

Bureaucracy offers one solution to alleviate the human limitations of information acquisition.15 Leaders cannot alter the fundamental uncertainty of the international system, but they can delegate information collection and processing tasks to state organizations with capacities that extend beyond the leader’s human limitations.16 Moreover, leaders can further divide labor among bureaucrats to foster task specialization, allowing bureaucrats to develop knowledge and expertise in specific domains. In short, leaders need information and bureaucracies can supply it.17

Although a division of labor among bureaucracies can afford leaders with more and potentially better information than they could obtain on their own, it can also introduce a new set of pathways to miscalculation. First, leaders might miscalculate because they lack information that bureaucrats possess or could easily possess. Second, leaders might miscalculate because the information that bureaucrats provide is of low-quality. Bureaucrats might search halfheartedly, fail to identify what information is valuable for leaders to know, or distort the information they relay.

These pathways draw attention to two questions. First, how costly (i.e., how easy) is it for leaders to search for information? Second, what are the incentives for and constraints on the bureaucracy to provide quality information? The next section argues that the answers to these questions depend on the state’s national security institutions. While there is always a baseline risk of initiating crises that fail to achieve the anticipated goals – either because of private information or cognitive resistance to belief revision – some leaders face institutional constraints on the information available that others do not.18

National Security Institutions and Miscalculation

States differ in their capacity to perform the functions of governance. In the context of foreign policy decision-making, state capacity to collect and process information is established by national security institutions: a set of rules and procedures that define the roles, constraints, and expectations of the bureaucracies responsible for informing and advising leaders.19 These institutions shape how information flows between and among leaders and the bureaucracy. They influence how information is taken in, how it is distributed and condensed, and how it leaves the state system.20

National security institutions differ along two key dimensions. First, institutions differ in their capacity to assist leaders in their search for information. Some states feature inclusive structures that build bureaucratic capacity to collect information and reduce costs for information to flow vertically from the bureaucracy to the leader.21 Other states instead feature insular structures that reduce bureaucratic capacity and obstruct vertical information flow. Second, states differ in their capacity to facilitate information sharing between bureaucracies. Some states feature open structures that ease the costs of horizontal information flow, while others feature closed structures that prevent bureaucracies from accessing each other’s information. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, there are four types of national security institutions that a state might possess: inclusive, open institutions (integrated); inclusive, closed institutions (siloed); insular, closed institutions (fragmented); and insular, open institutions (dictatorial).22

The remainder of this section develops a theory explaining when and why states are likely to miscalculate along the pathways discussed earlier. The theory makes three core claims. First, miscalculation is least likely under integrated institutions and most likely under fragmented institutions, with the likelihood of miscalculation under siloed institutions falling somewhere in between. Second, siloed and fragmented institutions lead states to miscalculate along systematically different pathways. Third, states with dictatorial institutions tend to miscalculate in ways similar to fragmented institutions, but these institutional designs are rare.

Information Search Capacity: Inclusive and Insular Structures

The first dimension is the institution’s capacity to search for information. States differ considerably in this regard. At one end of the spectrum are inclusive structures that provide leaders with a more complete understanding of their environment. Broadly speaking, states expand information search capacity in many ways, ranging from increasing the size of bureaucratic organizations to establishing rules that emphasize merit-based appointment.23 This study is particularly interested in the capacity to channel information from the bureaucracy to the leader, such as through the creation and design of advisory bodies on which senior bureaucratic officials sit.

Inclusive bodies for decision-making shape the information available to leaders in two ways.24 First, they reduce transaction costs of channeling information from the bureaucracy to the leader. Information, in short, is “more cheaply available” when states possess these capacities.25 Second, inclusive decision-making bodies motivate bureaucrats to look for information. Foreign policy information is costly to acquire. In inclusive structures, the opportunity to shape the leader’s choices encourages bureaucrats to pay these costs.26 In sum, bureaucrats in inclusive structures should both be driven to uncover more information and have an easier time relaying that information to the leader.

At the other end of the institutional spectrum are states with insular structures, which have a limited capacity to relay information to leaders. Information outside the state system, as well as bureaucratic expertise within it, is less likely to be incorporated into a leader’s information set. This might be because transaction costs are higher or because bureaucrats have limited motives to provide counsel.

Several historical examples illustrate how insular structures create incomplete information sets for leaders. Prior to institutional reforms in the United States after World War II, for example, only a small fraction of diplomatic reporting from abroad reached the Oval Office.27 In Wilhelmine Germany, the Immediatstellen – the rules regulating who had direct access to the Kaiser – afforded disproportionate access to German defense officials at the expense of diplomats, such that the information that the Kaiser received on the eve of World War I overwhelmingly focused on military capabilities rather than diplomacy.28 Indeed, one review of European intelligence agencies prior to World War I and World War II found that less successful intelligence performance was characterized by poor information flow and unstable processes.29

Quality of Bureaucratic Information: Open and Closed Structures

Having established that some states possess more search capacity than others, we now turn to the quality of information that leaders receive. Here, high quality refers to the most accurate information available given the constraints of the international system. The key insight here is that quality emerges from the incentives and constraints that institutional structure imposes on the bureaucracy. As historian Ernest May notes in the context of Tsarist Russia, the “extent to which” policymakers failed to ask probing questions when deciding between war and peace cannot simply be attributed to “dull-wittedness,” but rather to the structures that dissuaded “the exposure of issues.”30

Specifically, the quality of information a leader receives hinges in large part on a second dimension of national security institutions: a bureaucracy’s access to information elsewhere in the state. This capacity might be built through the establishment of coordination bodies that reduce costs of information exchange, by ensuring that key bureaucracies are all appointed to the same bodies, and by appointing managers and staffs that expand capacity for oversight of information sharing.

Access to information in other parts of the state (or horizontal information flow) is crucial for two reasons. First, horizontal information flow allows bureaucrats to identify when their own information needs to be relayed to the leader. Bureaucrats must choose which pieces of information are valuable enough for the leader to know. This can be challenging when meaning is interdependent – that is, when the value of two pieces of information changes when evaluated together than when considered apart.31 Consider a situation in which two signals are received simultaneously. A diplomat receives a bargaining demand from an adversary and a military commander observes an increase in the adversary’s border forces. Each bureaucracy’s report suggests that the adversary is resolved, but neither independently meets the minimum value necessary to report it to the leader. Institutions affect whether bureaucrats can solve the puzzle. If the system is closed, the bureaucrat sees only half the picture and, as such, cannot properly assess the value of their own data. If the system is instead open, the bureaucrat can put the two pieces together and, in turn, choose to report their observations to the leader.

Second, horizontal information flow affects incentives for the bureaucracy to intentionally withhold or distort information to suit their parochial interests. In open systems, bureaucrats know what conclusions other bureaucrats have drawn and have passed to leaders. This awareness allows dissenting bureaucrats to relay their own information to initiate a debate. Consider a situation in which the foreign and defense ministry possess different projections about the costs and benefits of triggering a crisis. The defense ministry prepares a report for the leader emphasizing the benefits. The foreign ministry can choose to rebut the report, but many only deem it worthy of the leader’s attention if they are aware of the defense ministry’s assessment.32 As Anthony Downs summarizes, the “classic antidote” of a monopoly on information is “competition.”33

This ability to police one another’s information shapes the incentives of bureaucrats for providing quality information in the first place. Each bureaucracy knows that debate is in the offing. Anticipation of deliberation encourages provision of the information with the best odds of winning the debate. The back-and-forth discussion between advisers results in a leader that is more fully informed and better positioned to identify inaccuracies in the information that bureaucrats provide.34 In sum, leaders sitting atop institutions with open access between bureaucracies tend to have access to higher-quality information as they make decisions about peace and conflict.

Having explained the fundamental intuition behind the two dimensions of national security institutions, we can now turn to how the four potential combinations shape the propensity for miscalculation in international crisis. The remainder of this section first discusses integrated institutions, which are best suited to avoid miscalculation. It then compares integrated institutions to three other institutional types – siloed, fragmented, and dictatorial – which make miscalculation more likely relative to integrated alternatives.

**<Condensed>**

Integrated Institutions: The Benefits of Being Informed. The combination of inclusive information search and open bureaucratic access in integrated institutions tends to decrease the risk of miscalculation through competitive dialogue.35 Open structures improve the quality of information that bureaucrats possess, and inclusive search capacity affords them opportunities to easily relay their counsel. The combination of the two dimensions is critical. Even the highest quality intelligence report will not shape state behavior if it cannot reach the leader. While one might assume that the presence of multiple actors in a leader’s decision-making process is a sufficient condition to yield better information provision, the idea of integrated institutions hinges on the inclusion of three specific types of bureaucracies: diplomatic, defense, and intelligence. There are two reasons for this. The first is that leaders need access to specific types of information and expertise. The previous discussion noted that leaders have three informational demands when considering an international crisis: strategic options, costs, and probable outcomes. As summarized in Table 2.1, the data that inform these leader judgments tend to cluster in different bureaucracies. As one American official pithily notes, “where you sit usually determines what you see closely.”36 The effectiveness of integrated institutions depends upon including representatives who can provide the right types of information. Some critical information clusters in defense ministries. Defense bureaucrats collect and process information on battlefield capabilities and contextualize this information with knowledge about their own state’s military strength.37 For leaders, this expertise is vital to identifying the available battlefield strategies, projecting the costs of each, and assessing the likelihood of successful battlefield outcomes. Defense bureaucracies can leverage expertise on the balance of military capabilities to estimate how many casualties battlefield fighting is likely to inflict, helping leaders to determine the limits of what can be accomplished through force. Other critical information clusters in foreign ministries. Diplomats collect and process information about the adversary’s history, culture, and domestic politics, all of which constrain the policies that adversaries choose.38 This expertise is important not only to identifying the possible negotiated settlements the state might pursue, but also in projecting the adversary’s willingness to bear costs and make concessions. An adversary’s response in an international crisis depends on whether they are willing to pay costs and run risks rather than back down.39 Political characteristics of the regime shape these reactions. These include the intrinsic stakes of the issue (e.g., the cost of losing strategic territory), the dispositions of their leaders (e.g., patience, risk tolerance, and time horizons), and the strategic beliefs, ideologies, and culture of domestic audiences.40 In short, diplomatic bureaucracies, which specialize in acquiring and analyzing this type of information, can help leaders know the bounds of what adversaries will accept during crisis negotiations. The second reason why the effectiveness of integrated institutions depends on inclusion of these specific bureaucracies pertains to their organizational perspectives and worldviews. For one, diplomatic and defense bureaucracies tend to possess systematically different foreign policy perspectives.41 Elite surveys find that hawkish individuals tend to cluster in defense bureaucracies, while dovish individuals cluster in diplomatic ones.42 Analysis of policy deliberations during the Cold War shows that hawkish and dovish advisers tend to emphasize different topics, with the latter drawing attention to adversary interests and diplomatic engagement.43 In short, a dialogue between diplomatic and defense actors helps curb the risk that all members view problems the same way.44 As a result, we would expect that integration of both diplomatic and defense bureaucracies would deliver higher quality information to the leader through more competitive dialogue. A similar logic underlies the reason why integrated institutions benefit from the inclusion of intelligence bureaucracies as well. One of the potential challenges of information provided by diplomatic and defense ministries is that both have substantial roles in policy implementation. This means that the information they provide could potentially be biased depending on the way in which the policy affects their interests as leader decisions are enacted. In contrast, intelligence bureaucrats are often separated from implementation, meaning that they have limited organizational stakes in the leader’s choice. As such, the information that they provide regarding the probable outcomes, costs, and strategic options might provide an additional check on diplomatic and defense reporting. We would thus expect that integration of intelligence bureaucracies yields higher quality information that complements the dialogue between diplomatic and defense bureaucracies.45 Evidence from experimental settings provide some insight into the foundations by which integrated institutions work. Groups tend to perform better than individuals in geopolitical forecasting and identifying more effective bargaining strategies, for example.46 Diverse teams of randomly selected individuals outperform teams of even the best performing individuals in problem-solving tasks.47 Scholars of organizational behavior have similarly found that structure improves group learning by creating stable expectations.48 For example, Michaéla Schippers and coauthors show how improving common knowledge of goals, processes, and outcomes decreases team-level bias and information processing failures.49 These theoretical intuitions are in tension with the common perspective that integrating the bureaucracy into foreign policy decision-making tends to raise the risk of miscalculation by leading to in-fighting between bureaucratic actors with different parochial interests – and that institutional devices are unable to attenuate these pathologies. The logic of integrated institutions instead suggests that the effects of bureaucratic participation in decision-making can make states “smarter” under integrated institutions. Siloed Institutions: The Costs of Uninformed Bureaucracies. Siloed institutions, in contrast to integrated alternatives, tend to raise the risk of miscalculation as leaders initiate international crises. While inclusive structures increase the amount of information available to leaders, the bureaucracy’s limited access to it impairs their ability and incentives to provide high-quality information. This decrease in information quality results from two factors, both of which complement the logic of integrated institutions.50 First, siloed institutions constrain the bureaucracy’s ability to identify which bits of information are valuable for the leader to know. Under Joseph Stalin, for instance, the Soviet military possessed only a fraction of the government’s intelligence reports, which undermined the defense leadership’s ability to assess the likelihood of a German invasion in 1941. As one Soviet general later reflected, Soviet defense officials “probably did not do enough to convince Stalin that war with Germany was inevitable in the very near future.”51 Second, bureaucrats are more likely to provide leaders with information that reflects their parochial interests. Unlike in integrated institutions, a limited horizontal information flow constrains bureaucracies’ ability to police one another. Knowing that their information will not be scrutinized, bureaucrats submit biased reports, mainly with an eye to achieving their own organizational goals. Under siloed institutions in the Soviet Union, for instance, bureaucracies rarely questioned each other’s information. Historian Vladislav Zubok suggests that Foreign Minister Gromyko had “the first say in diplomatic affairs,” whereas Defense Ministers Grechko and Ustinov had “a virtual monopoly in military matters.” It is unsurprising, then, that prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Foreign Ministry did not question the “amazingly tenuous” reporting of the KGB and the Defense Ministry.52 Under siloed institutions, the information available to leaders thus tends to be less complete and less accurate than under integrated institutions. Given the discussion earlier, it is natural to consider how siloing might raise the risk of miscalculation by limiting access to three types of information that leaders need. First, leaders might receive incomplete or low-quality information about the probable outcome of a crisis, primarily in the form of inaccurate assessments about the likelihood of battlefield victory or adversary concessions. Second, leaders might receive incomplete or low-quality information about the potential costs of a crisis, failing to accurately identify the price that the country will pay for initiation. Third, leaders might receive incomplete or low-quality information about the options available to them. That is, they might not receive an assessment of the alternative means whereby they could achieve their goals. Numerous historical examples illustrate the logic of how siloed institutions lead to leader miscalculation. For instance, Russia triggered a crisis in 1908 when Foreign Minister Alexander Izvolsky intimated his approbation of Austria-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia. While the Tsar had approved the Foreign Ministry’s strategy, he did so without information from the other ministries in Moscow, which undermined his ability to identify the weakness of the Russian military position. Similarly, prior to World War I, the same siloed system allowed the Russian War Minister to develop a defense policy that was at odds with its diplomatic commitments to France.53 In sum, states with siloed institutions are more likely to miscalculate than states with integrated ones. This occurs for a specific reason: leaders sitting atop siloed institutions lack access to interdependent information and make decisions with information that is biased by parochial perspectives. Constraints on the bureaucracy’s access to information matter because bureaucrats can relay information to the leader. The interaction of inclusive information search and closed bureaucratic access to information work together to raise the risk of miscalculation.

**<Integrity Returns>**

Fragmented Institutions: The Costs of Uninformed Leaders. Fragmented institutions also tend to raise the risk of miscalculation, but for different reasons. One reason is that they introduce the possibility of functional failures in information exchange between the bureaucracy and the leader. For instance, exclusion of defense bureaucracies might limit access to information regarding the prospects of winning on the battlefield, the costs of fighting, or the possible battlefield strategies the state might employ. Exclusion of diplomatic bureaucracies might limit access to information about the prospects of adversary concessions, likely adversary reactions, or possible negotiated settlements.

Yet fragmented institutions lead to miscalculation for another reason as well. They cause bureaucrats to censor their counsel and manipulate the information that they supply to match the leader’s beliefs. Fragmentation does not simply create barriers to information provision. It also shapes a bureaucrat’s understanding of the types of behaviors that the leader deems appropriate and will therefore reward for two broad reasons.

First, the decision to fragment institutions in itself conveys that leaders will not permit deliberation or dissent within the administration – and may punish bureaucrats who speak truth to power. Seeing some bureaucrats shut out leads others to shut down. Consider a bureaucrat choosing between relaying candid information and withholding or manipulating information. The institutional design shapes the bureaucrat’s understanding of which type of behavior the leader deems appropriate. Whereas the decision to integrate institutions conveys that leaders value genuine deliberation, the choice for fragmentation instead signals that leaders prefer that bureaucrats remain silent. Fragmented institutions thus shut down genuine debate. As Michael Geyer notes in his analysis of Nazi Germany’s intelligence system, “By fragmenting his intelligence network [. . . ] Hitler reshaped and transformed the role of intelligence much more radically than by simply demanding one or another ideological bias.”54

Second, fragmented institutions strip bureaucrats of the status and authority that assists them in speaking truth to power.55 Bureaucrats with low status fear arbitrary punishment at the hands of the leader for reporting what the leader does not want to hear. As a result, they might protect themselves by only providing information they know the leader already believes. Instead of expending effort to gain information on the true state of the world, bureaucrats instead expend effort determining what the leader already believes and tailoring their reporting to match it.56 On the eve of the First World War, for instance, German diplomats distorted and omitted important details in their reporting in order to relay what Berlin “wanted to hear,” even when “they knew it to fly in the face of reality.”57 Bureaucrats might also protect themselves through excessively vague reporting that can be interpreted in multiple ways, such that their reporting matches the leaders belief regardless of whether it changes in the future. This strategy is particularly useful when bureaucrats cannot deduce what the leader is thinking, as is often the case in in fragmented systems.

#### Extremists cause nuclear war.

Van Jackson 23. Associate professor of international relations at the Victoria University of Wellington, Ph.D. in international relations from the Catholic University of America. Duck of Minerva. 10-26-2023. duckofminerva.com/2023/10/the-fascist-nuke-problem.html

The world could use some serious thinking about the relationship between political ideology and nuclear escalation—specifically far-right pathways to nuclear war.

The nuclear strategy literature is full of smart claims from many angles: entanglement risks, discrimination problems, first-use incentives, credible commitments, retaliatory v. catalytic v. asymmetric postures, the staying power of the nuclear revolution, and the escalatory potential of different kinds of nuclear crises.

But regime type is not a major preoccupation of nuclear wonks, and to the extent it factors into nuclear theorizing at all, it’s via the narrow coding scheme of democratic or authoritarian regimes.

A military junta, for instance, might be more likely to have a “cult of the offensive” mindset. A cash-strapped developmental autocracy may have more lax control of nukes, or be more prone to miscommunication or misperception because of broken command-and-control arrangements.

Good insights, but it’s not enough.

It’s common sense that autocracy comes in wide-ranging hues and we should be capable of separating a Singapore from a Nazi Germany. But also the democratic/authoritarian binary elides cases in which a far-right “populist” takes power via a democratic electoral system.

A Reactionary Blind Spot?

During the Trump years, many of us saw and worried aloud about the increase in nuclear escalation risks, especially during 2017 and early 2018. But even as I recognized that period of time as bringing us closer to nuclear war than any moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis, in explaining it I had focused on the idiosyncrasies of Trump the irrational man blustering into crisis-prone structures. I hadn’t thought seriously about the imagination and prejudices that colored his irrationality in the first place, or the reactionary militarist politics that can get activated within the bureaucracy because of who sits atop it.

Fast forward to 2023.

Not only have we seen the Trump years. We see an India that has become a flagrantly revisionist actor fuelled by violent, exclusionary Hindu nationalism. We see an Israel that has, in a matter of weeks, gone from an oppressive settler colonial project in the West Bank to an even more ruthless siege of Gaza in violation of international law.

The nuclear trouble here, if it is not obvious, is that if you can de-humanize one you can de-humanize all. This was always the most terrifying thing about Trump, it’s built into his politics, and you cannot really separate it from a willingness to engage in mass-casualty violence.

This has been on my mind for a while, but I was more recently triggered, in a good way, by a new book called Nuclear Flashpoint: The War over Kashmir. The author, who is not a nuclear specialist, tries to draw attention to the intersection of power politics and nuclear risk by way of Kashmir’s plight:

This wider conflict between the US and China is being played out not just in Ukraine and in the Middle East, but also in Kashmir…India is supporting the US in this wider rivalry and claiming Chinese territory. There’s some really outrageous language being used about fighting China and Pakistan at the same time…talking recklessly about a war between three nuclear powers! This tripartite nuclear entanglement is so dangerous.

The research space that book has just barely entered is one that deserves more attention.

Rather than thinking about nuclear risk in the context of democracy versus autocracy, what about regimes engaged in settler colonial projects or genocide? What about regimes that see some version of permanent war as necessary, or even good? What about regimes whose leaders engage in pogroms or embrace other modes of violent ethnonationalism?

Imagining New Hypotheses

When we see nuclear powers willing to engage in such humanity-erasing practices, should we judge nuclear risks only on the basis of the nuclear balance, ideal-type nuclear posture, or whether a state’s arsenal is survivable?

Maybe, for instance, our concern with Chinese nukes should transcend the relative or absolute lethality and consider the fact that China under Xi Jinping is fuelled by an ethnonationalism at home that spills over into jingoistic rhetoric and posturing abroad. Maybe.

What I’m getting at is this: The way we think about nuclear deterrence has an ideological blind spot when it comes to extremist politics like fascism (or whatever synonym you prefer) just as it does when it comes to patriarchy (which, not incidentally, forms part of the content of extreme reactionary movements of various types).

Ethnonationalism for sure colors risk propensity. But it would also seem that, in the modern world, white supremacists are not good geopoliticians. How could they be if they have a deranged mental map for how the world works? And the dehumanization of a population is at least a favorable condition (if not a prerequisite) for wielding nuclear death over them.

To take an illustrative example, prior to 1962, the US conducted 105 nuclear tests that poisoned water, destroyed territory, contaminated population centers, and spread cancer across large swathes of the Pacific. And it continued missile testing in these areas right up until the end of the Cold War. To this day, the US government has failed to remediate and repair the damage even as it tries to court Pacific governments in its struggle against China.

The violence done against the Pacific by US nuclear testing was predicated on either seeing the Pacific and its peoples as less than or not seeing them at all—it was just a space for colonial projection, which allowed it to serve dubious strategic purposes.

Following this reasoning, I can imagine reactionary regimes (including, under certain alt futures, the United States) as more likely than others to wantonly violate nuclear-free zone treaties. We’ve seen that North Korea—which is far closer to fascism than communism—routinely depicts its enemies in debasing terms, which is an enabling condition for its nuclear strategy. And the “reactionary international,” sometimes called the fascist international or nationalist international, is a conceivable pathway for horizontal proliferation.

I don’t propose to have all the answers. My point is just that the nuclear community—which is not and should not be monolithic—is mostly in the business of thinking about futures that haven’t happened. The community’s value is as an anticipatory industry.

So maybe we should anticipate how and why extreme right-wing violence and governance (I repeat myself) could spill over into strategic considerations in ways that we’ve never bothered to imagine.

#### The best data demonstrates that democracy solves interstate AND civil war.

Jeremey Ko 25. Research assistant at the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, M.A. candidate in comparative and international studies and international political economy at ETH Zürich, B.A. in global studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "The Peace Penalty of Backsliding: Autocratization and Interstate Conflict Worldwide." *Social Science Quarterly*, 106(7), 2-9.

Whether these domestic institutional transitions fundamentally threaten international stability remains debated. Yet, across diverse contexts, episodes of authoritarian deepening have coincided with more assertive or aggressive interstate conduct. In Russia, partial and uneven democratization in the 1990s was followed by rapid centralization under Putin and Medvedev, preceding the use of force against Georgia (2008) and successive escalations against Ukraine (2014, 2022) (Klimovich 2023; Snegovaya 2023). In Israel, prolonged executive consolidation under Benjamin Netanyahu—including the 2023 judicial overhaul widely viewed as undermining judicial independence—occurred alongside repeated uses of force: the 2010 Gaza flotilla raid, major Gaza operations(2012, 2014, 2021, 2023-‑present), persistent strikesin Syria since 2013, and escalation with Iran and Hezbollah since 2023 (Akirav 2024; Mhajne 2025; Shomer et al. 2025). These cases illustrate how the consolidation of power and erosion of accountability can make military action more politically viable. As political leaders weaken institutional constraints and public oversight, external conflict becomes an instrument for consolidating authority. Understanding this connection between domestic autocratization and outward aggression is essential for anticipating the international consequences of regime transformation and assessing the risks it poses to global stability and security.

Research on regime change and conflict has grown steadily, but less attention has been paid to how autocratization reshapes the domestic survival incentives that drive leaders’ decisions to become involved in interstate war. Drawing on selectorate theory developed by De Mesquita et al. (2004), I argue that democratic backsliding narrows the coalition a leader must satisfy to remain in power. As that coalition contracts, dependence on elite patronage deepens while public accountability weakens, giving leaders greater freedom to take risks abroad. External confrontation thus becomes a means of reinforcing elite loyalty and diverting public dissatisfaction. As autocratization advances, these altered incentives make military action increasingly appealing— particularly where institutional checks have weakened or ceased to function effectively. By linking coalition dynamics to patterns of external aggression, I show how autocratization as an ongoing domestic process reshapes the logic of interstate conflict, raising new concerns for international stability and security as leaders in backsliding regimes grow more willing to use coercion for political survival.

Accordingly, the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literatures on selectorate theory and its application to armed conflict onset, research on regime change and interstate conflict, and the resulting conceptual and empirical gaps. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Section 4 details the data, variables, and empirical strategy. Section 5 presents the empirical results and robustness checks, and Section 6 concludes with implications for theory and policy

2 | Literature Review and Hypothesis Formation

2.1 | Selectorate Theory and Its Application to Armed Conflict Initiation

Selectorate theory, developed by De Mesquita et al. (2004), offers a framework for understanding how the structure of political regimes shapes leaders’ incentives in decisions of war and peace. The theory posits that all leaders depend on a winning coalition (W)—the group whose continued support is essential for staying in power—within a broader selectorate (S), the portion of the population eligible to influence leadership selection. The proportion of W to S (the W/S ratio) determines whether a regime relies primarily on the provision of public goods that benefit the majority or on the allocation of private benefits to a narrow elite. In democracies, the W/S ratio is large because competitive elections, free media, and institutional accountability empower broad constituenciesto decide politicalsurvival. Leaders must therefore focus on the provision of public goods that benefits the welfare of the population rather than selective privilege, tying their tenure to the delivery of public goods that enhance collective welfare— such as economic prosperity, internal stability, and national security—ratherthan the selective distribution of private rewards to narrow elites (De Mesquita et al. 2004; Ko and Leung 2026).

Domestic populations bear the tangible hardships of recession, inflation, and socioeconomic insecurity and face the risk of direct mobilization or conscription into armed conflict, making war an acutely visible and collectively experienced burden (Brito and Intriligator 1985). By contrast, any potential benefits are narrowly constrained to specific groups, such as defense industries, political elites seeking prestige, or strategically positioned interest groups that may profit from military spending or territorial gains. Because these rewards accrue to only a small segment of society while the costs are widely distributed, the mass public overwhelmingly perceives war as detrimental to collective welfare. Democratic leaders therefore confront substantial audience costs—the domestic political and reputational penalties imposed by informed citizens when leaders act inconsistently, escalate irresponsibly, or suffer defeat. These audience costs make the political price of using force exceptionally high and encourage restraint in foreign policy decisions (Bausch 2015). Consequently, the large‑W structure characteristic of democracies alignsleaders’ incentives with peace, as producing the public bad of war undermines, rather than sustains, their political survival.

Because the winning coalition (W) in autocracies is small relative to the selectorate (S), leaders in these regimes face fundamentally different incentives from those in large‑W democracies. When the W/S ratio is low, political survival depends on distributing private goods—monetary payments, patronage, or privileged access to resources—to a narrow group of loyal elites rather than producing broad public goods (De Mesquita et al. 2004). Under this configuration, the costs of war—human casualties, economic disruption, and resource depletion—are dispersed across the vast excluded portion of S, which lacks the capacity to hold leaders accountable. Meanwhile, the returns from conflict—such as territorial gains, rents, and prestige—can be concentrated among members of W, whose continued support secures regime stability (Bausch 2015). Consequently, autocratic systems, defined by small‑W and large‑S structures, face weaker constraints on the use of force: the political risks of failure are confined to a handful of insiders who can be compensated through renewed private benefits. With the broader selectorate largely disenfranchised, war in low‑W/S regimes functions as a strategic tool of coalition maintenance, enabling rulers to channel resources toward their core supporters and thereby preserve their political survival (De Mesquita et al. 2004).

2.2 | Empirical Literature on Regime Change and Interstate War

Early studies of regime change and conflict were deeply influenced by concerns about the turbulent effects of democratization, particularly when liberalization outpaced institutional consolidation. Mansfield and Snyder (1995, 2002) describe these transitional, or anocratic, phases as moments when elites exploit nationalist sentiment to maintain power without the full constraints of democratic institutions. Weak executive oversight and diffuse authority give military, bureaucratic, and industrial factions room to promote expansionist goals, while partisan media heighten nationalist fervor. Under such conditions, miscommunication and muted audience costs make preventive or diversionary conflict a tempting strategy. Later work, however, casts doubt on whether democratization by itself drives interstate aggression. Enterline (1998), for example, suggests that the real danger lies not in states opening politically, but in those sliding back toward autocracy. Following the collapse of hybrid or pseudo‑democratic systems, new autocrats often consolidate power through foreign adventures that distract from domestic fragility. Democratizing states, by contrast, tend to remain constrained enough to avoid the reckless external behavior seen in these reversals.

Although findings on democratization and interstate war remain mixed, scholars largely agree that regime transitions—especially democratization—carry a pronounced risk of internal conflict. Cederman et al. (2010) show how rapid political openings destabilize existing hierarchies: newly empowered actors compete for influence while displaced elites resist the emerging order. When expanded participation exceeds institutional capacity, these tensions can spiral into civil war, particularly in fragile states. The resulting instability thus reflects the upheaval of transition itself rather than any inherent democratic impulse. By comparison, research on autocratization—especially its international effects— has developed more recently, yet it reveals a similar logic of disruption. Cederman et al. (2010) and Peic and Reiter (2011) find that closing political space, whether through domestic repression or externally imposed authoritarianism, provokes resistance among excluded groups. With institutions weakened and participation channels cut off, states become vulnerable to renewed violence. These studies emphasize that instability flows less from the ideological direction of change than from the institutional shocks and lost legitimacy that accompany it.

Extending this reasoning to foreign policy, more recent work suggests that autocratization also heightens the risks of interstate conflict. Enterline (1998) observes that emerging autocrats often use military disputes to consolidate rule. Downes and O’Rourke (2016) show that foreign‑imposed regime changes can produce principal–agent frictions between interveners and the leaders they install, frequently resulting in renewed hostility. Tschantret (2020) adds that democratic breakdown tends to empower leaders drawn to decisiveness and quick victories; in personalist systems—where audience costs vanish—these impulses easily translate into external aggression. Taken together, this body of research suggests that autocratization, whether internal or externally induced, tends to increase short‑term propensities for conflict. The mechanisms differ—ranging from elite consolidation and leader opportunism to institutional misalignment and lingering nationalist mobilization—but the underlying theme is consistent: when political authority contracts and constraints weaken, leaders face stronger incentives to use military force as a means of securing their own survival.

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2.3 | Literature Gap and Contribution Despite advances in understanding the link between regime change and states’ propensity to engage in interstate or intrastate war, important gaps remain—particularly regarding the dynamics of autocratization. Most studies treat autocratization as a secondary category, often grouping it with other forms of regime change. For example, Cederman et al. (2010) and Downes and O’Rourke (2016) focus primarily on regime change in general or on democratization, while autocratization is subsumed under broader discussions or treated as residual. This approach limits our ability to identify the specific mechanisms through which autocratization contributes to interstate and intrastate conflict. To address this gap, the present study directly quantifies the extent and tempo of autocratization by constructing a continuous, year‑on‑year backsliding severity index derived from V‑Dem components and aggregating 5‑year declines. By estimating the dose‑-response relationship between the magnitude and composition of backsliding and subsequent interstate war onset and escalation, it captures not only whether autocratization occurs, but also the extent to which its intensity elevates interstate conflict risk. Second, most existing research conceptualizes democratic breakdown as a simple shift from democracy to autocracy (e.g., Tschantret 2020). While informative, this approach overlooks that autocratization often occurs gradually—through the steady erosion of democratic qualities in still‑democratic systems or the deepening of authoritarian practices in already autocratic ones. Binary indicators blur these differences by collapsing minor, gradual declines and major, abrupt contractions into a single category. I instead trace year‑on‑year changes in a composite democracy index, preserving information on both magnitude and tempo and linking these dynamics to future interstate conflict risk. Viewed through the lens of selectorate theory, such shifts reflect changes in coalition size and accountability—specifically in the ratio between the winning coalition and the broader selectorate (W/S)—which gradually alter leaders’ incentives and reliance on public versus private goods. Autocratization is therefore understood not as a one‑time regime change, but as an ongoing adjustment in the domestic bases of political survival that can unfold in both democratic and authoritarian settings. This process‑oriented view allows for a clearer understanding of how different trajectories—slow attrition or sudden collapse—shape a state’s willingness to engage in interstate conflict, moving beyond rigid threshold‑based classifications. Third, although some research has explored the belligerence of regimes formed through democratic breakdown, these analyses often rely on frameworks such as principal–agent dynamics or elite‑driven nationalism without fully integrating insights from selectorate theory. Principal–agent models, which emphasize misaligned interests between leaders and external actors (Downes and O’Rourke 2016), apply mainly to foreign‑imposed regime changes and fail to capture internally driven processes like democratic backsliding in Turkey or Hungary. Similarly, elite‑driven nationalism, as formulated by Mansfield and Snyder (1995, 2002), focuses on short‑term elite manipulation during transitional periods and often overlooks how long‑term institutional erosion—such as the reduction of audience costs and accountability—shapes foreign policy behavior in comparatively stable yet autocratizing regimes. These perspectives, while valuable, are less suited to explaining how shrinking winning coalitions and weakening institutional constraints systematically increase conflict risk during autocratic backsliding. Although some research has explored the belligerence of regimes formed through democratic breakdown, these analyses often rely on frameworks such as principal–agent dynamics or elite‑driven nationalism without fully incorporating insights from selectorate theory. Principal–agent models, which emphasize misaligned interests between leaders and external actors (Downes and O’Rourke 2016), apply mainly to foreign‑imposed regime changes and fail to capture internally driven processes like autocratization in Russia. Similarly, elite‑driven nationalism, as described by Mansfield and Snyder (1995, 2002), focuses on short‑term elite manipulation during transitions but overlooks how steady declines in accountability and audience costs shape foreign policy behavior in more stable, autocratizing regimes. In addition, Tschantret (2020) advances a constructivist‑informed institutional theory, emphasizing how the erosion of democratic norms and constraints following regime breakdown reshapes leaders’ identities and perceptions, increasing the likelihood of interstate conflict. These perspectives, while valuable, are less equipped to explain the autocratization process, in which gradual changes in who sustains the leader—and how that support is maintained—incrementally transform political incentives and state behavior. Selectorate theory captures this logic directly: as the winning coalition (W) contracts relative to the selectorate (S), leaders become more dependent on a small circle of insiders, face fewer domestic constraints, and find external conflict a useful means of consolidating support and signaling strength. Building on this reasoning, I apply selectorate theory—a framework suitable for comparing democracies and autocracies—to examine how autocratization reshapes leaders’ incentives to use force. Selectorate theory posits that the size of the winning coalition (W) relative to the selectorate (S) determines the extent to which leaders depend on broad public support versus a narrow group of loyal insiders (De Mesquita et al. 2004). When the W/S ratio is small, leaders rely more heavily on private rewards to maintain elite loyalty and face fewer constraints on risky or aggressive behavior. Extending this logic, the study treats autocratization as a process that gradually reduces the W/S ratio, shifting political survival from broad public approval to insider support. By tracking year‑to‑year declines in democratic quality, the analysis links this coalition contraction to stronger incentives for coercive and militarized strategies. 2.4 Mechanisms and Hypothesis Formation I draw on the logic of selectorate theory to explain why autocratization—whether democratic backsliding in established democracies or authoritarian deepening in autocracies— heightens the likelihood of interstate war. Selectorate theory is particularly suited to this analysis because it models conflict behavior as a function of leaders’ domestic political survival incentives rather than as a product of interstate or dyadic dynamics. By emphasizing how institutional change reshapes leaders’ strategic calculus, it reveals the mechanisms that drive conflict regardless of regime type or specific state pairings. In the selectorate framework, a leader’s survival depends on maintaining the loyalty of a winning coalition (W) drawn from a broader selectorate (S). The ratio between these groups (W/S) determines the extent to which leaders must rely on broad public support versus the selective distribution of private benefits. When the winning coalition is large, leaders must deliver public goods—such as peace, prosperity, and stable governance—to sustain legitimacy. When the coalition is small, leaders can maintain power by providing private goods to a narrow circle of insiders—military officers, party elites, or economic patrons (De Mesquita et al. 2004; Ko and Leung 2025). I argue that autocratization directly alters this balance by shrinking the winning coalition relative to the selectorate, thereby transforming leaders’survival incentives. Asinstitutional constraints weaken and accountability erodes, leaders become less dependent on the general population—who constitute the broader selectorate from which support was once drawn—and more reliant on a compact network of elites whose loyalty ensures regime stability. The preferences of these insiders diverge sharply from those of the mass public. For ordinary citizens, interstate conflict represents a public bad, imposing costs in the form of mobilization, casualties, inflation, and reduced public spending. For elites, by contrast, war can become a source of private goods— access to rents, defense contracts, promotions, or expanded influence within the governing apparatus (Brito and Intriligator 1985). What harmsthe broader population may thus benefit those whose support is vital to the regime’s survival. This divergence of incentives weakens the political restraint once imposed by public costs and makes the use of force a rational means of preserving elite cohesion. When survival depends on rewarding a small inner circle rather than appealing to the public, the political returns from military engagement increase relative to its risks. Interstate conflict provides opportunitiesto allocate state resourcesto loyal factions, strengthen ties with the military, and reinforce the ruling coalition. Because the general population bears the burdens of war but has little influence over leadership tenure, audience costs decline,removing one of the main domestic constraints on the use of force. This institutional shift lowers the threshold for military action and increases leaders’ willingness to employ force abroad when it sustains elite support. Hence, as autocratization reduces the size of the winning coalition relative to the selectorate, leaders gain stronger incentives to favor policies that generate private benefits for core supporters. Under these conditions, external conflict becomes relatively less politically costly and potentially more rewarding (Tschantret 2020). Thus, engaging in interstate warthusfunctions as a strategic extension of elite management— a comparatively low‑risk, high‑return tool for political survival rooted in the private‑-goods logic central to selectorate theory. Hypothesis. Autocratization (regardless of democracy or autocracy) increases the risk of a country engaging in interstate war within the next 5 years

**<Integrity Returns>**

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Study Focus

I employ a cross-national time-series (CNTS) design with the country-year as the unit of analysis. The panel covers up to 155 countries from 1970 to 2023, subject to data availability across regions, regime types, and development levels. It is unbalanced due to state formation and dissolution and uneven indicator coverage; countries enter once minimally sufficient observations exist. The CNTS approach enables analysis of within-country dynamics and cross-country differences using annual variation in political, social, and economic indicators. The 1970–2023 window spans major geopolitical and economic shifts—including, the Cold War and its end, oil and debt crises, the third wave of democratization, market liberalization and globalization, the 2008–09 global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of digital information ecosystems— providing temporal heterogeneity across contexts to identify relationships between autocratization and the countries engaging in interstate war.

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3.2 Key Independent Variable The key independent variable I used is autocratization, defined broadly and continuously as any negative shift in a country’slevel of democracy across the regime spectrum, relative to the previous year of measurement (Panzano 2024). As discussed earlier, autocratization can occurin both democratic and autocratic contexts— manifesting either as democratic backsliding in established democracies or as deeper authoritarian entrenchment in existing autocracies. Democratic erosion is typically not a short‑term phenomenon but a gradual and cumulative process that unfolds through sustained institutional decline (Lührmann 2021; Son and Bellinger 2022). To capture this gradual dynamic, autocratization is operationalized as the 5‑year change in a country’s democracy score for each country‑year observation. This temporal window reflects the long‑term and incremental nature of institutional degradation, as single‑year fluctuations may underestimate the persistence of democratic decline. A multi‑year measure therefore provides a more reliable indicator of structural autocratization rather than short‑term political volatility. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Bagchi and Fagerstrom 2023; Vourvoulia and Kampas, 2024), I employ a composite democracy index derived from the Varieties of Democracy (V‑Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2019). The index is computed as the simple average of five sub‑components— electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy—each scaled from 0 to 100. Their unweighted average yields a comprehensive democracy score ranging from 0 (least democratic) to 100 (most democratic), capturing multiple dimensions of democratic quality while minimizing dependence on any single institutional aspect. Autocratization is then defined as the 5‑year change in this composite score, recoded so that declines in democracy yield positive values (indicating greater autocratization) and improvements yield negative values. For each country‑year, the current democracy score is compared to the score 5 years earlier; minimal or no change indicates stability. Observations are coded as missing when either score is unavailable. This measure reflects the continuous extent to which a state moves away from democratic governance toward autocratic rule. Importantly, although the winning‑coalition‑to‑selectorate ratio (W/S)—a central concept in selectorate theory—cannot be directly observed or consistently measured across countries and over time, the quality of democracy offers a conceptually grounded proxy in line with existing studies (e.g., Ko and Leung 2025). In selectorate terms, higher levels of democracy indicate that leaders rely on a larger and more heterogeneous winning coalition, maintained through competitive elections, institutional checks on executive authority, and active civic participation. These mechanisms broaden the selectorate and make political survival dependent on public rather than elite approval (De Mesquita et al. 2004). Autocratization, by contrast, political power becomes increasingly concentrated, with leaders relying less on broad public support and more on a narrow circle of elites. In this sense, declinesin democracy capture the contraction of W relative to S, reflecting a shift from publicly accountable governance toward elite‑based rule. Thus, this operationalization offers a theoretically consistent and empirically observable representation of how institutional change reconfigures leaders’ dependence— from the broader populace to a restricted set of loyal insiders 3.3 Dependent Variable I measure the dependent variable by employing a binary variable that captures the occurrence of inter-state war. Specifically, our primary dependent variable is a forward-looking binary indicator coded 1 if a country becomes involved in an inter-state war at any point in the subsequent 5 years (t+1 through t+5) and 0 otherwise. By default, involvement includes both onsets and continuations that occur within the window. The data for this variable will be sourced from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s (UCDP) Yearly Datasets covering 1946–2024, as detailed by Davies et al. (2024). The UCDP dataset provides comprehensive information on armed conflicts, including the type—whether it is interstate, intrastate, and internationalized intrastate, allowing for a precise identification of inter-state wars. Inter-state wars are defined based on established UCDP criteria, which include conflicts between at least two states that result in a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year. This operationalization ensures that the dependent variable captures the presence or absence of inter-state war. 3.4 Control Variables In addition to the main independent variable, I incorporate several control variables identified in the literature as influencing the likelihood of a state engaging in an interstate war in the subsequent 5 years. These variables (with details of operationalization and descriptive statistics are shown in Table A1 in the Supporting Information) and their potential effects are outlined below: ∙ Democracy Level: Selectorate theory suggests that leaders in democracies are less likely to initiate interstate wars because they face higher domestic costs for failure. In democracies, where leaders are accountable to a large winning coalition, failed wars can result in severe political consequences,such as loss of office or public backlash. This creates a strong incentive to avoid risky conflicts unless success is highly probable. As a result, democratic leaders are more cautious in their decisionmaking regarding war, reducing the likelihood of conflict initiation compared to regimes with smaller, less accountable coalitions (Bausch 2015; De Mesquita et al. 2004). ∙ Economic Development: Economic wealth increases the likelihood of interstate war by providing states with the resources and confidence to pursue ambitious military objectives against less powerfulstatesthat could potentially disrupt the balance of power. Wealthy states can fund advanced military forces, project power globally, and dominate rivals, enabling prolonged campaigns and large-scale mobilizations. This financial strength emboldens leaders to engage in coercive diplomacy or military interventions, calculating that their superior resources will secure quick, favorable outcomes with minimal risk (Mack 1975). Wealth thus enhances military readiness and the willingness to initiate wars for strategic or economic gains. ∙ Population: Larger populations enhance military power by providing a greater pool of manpower and resources to support war efforts. This increased capacity strengthens a state’s ability to project force and endure prolonged conflicts,shifting power dynamics in its favor. Confident in their enhanced capabilities, populous states may be more willing to resort to military action, raising the likelihood of interstate war (Mack 1975). ∙ Urban Population: Urban population is often associated with more liberal societal structures, which can influence the likelihood of interstate war. Urban centers tend to foster higher levels of political engagement, individual freedoms, and access to information (Sawyer et al. 2022), all of which contribute to stronger audience costs. These liberalizing effects make it more difficult for leaders to pursue aggressive foreign policies without significant domestic scrutiny or opposition. Moreover, urban populations, with their reliance on stable trade and infrastructure, are highly sensitive to the economic and social disruptions caused by war, further constraining leaders from initiating risky conflicts (Copeland 1996). ∙ Intrastate War: Civil conflicts generally reduce the likelihood of deliberate interstate war by severely limiting a state’s capacity to engage in external aggression. Similarly, ongoing civil wars erode state authority and cohesion, forcing leaders to prioritize regime survival over foreign policy. Thus, intrastate wars often weaken a state’s ability to initiate planned interstate conflicts, as both domestic priorities and deterrence dynamics dominate the agenda (Walter 2015). ∙ Military Spending: Higher military spending increases a state’s capacity to engage in interstate conflict by enhancing its ability to project power, sustain operations, and deter adversaries. A well-funded military can provide leaders with the resources and confidence to pursue more assertive foreign policies, including the use of force against other states (Mack 1975). Yet, significant increases in defense budgets may also raise tensions with neighboring states, as they perceive the buildup as a potential threat. Under security dilemma, it can lead to arms races and increased risks of conflict, particularly in regions with existing rivalries or unresolved disputes(Diehl 1983). 3.5 Empirical Modeling I employ two-way fixed effects (2WFE) for baseliner results to examine how autocratization trends in the past 5 years are associated with the probability of interstate warin the subsequent 5 years. The 2WFE approach accounts for country-fixed effects, which control for time-invariant characteristics unique to each country (e.g., geography, history, culture), and year-fixed effects, which capture global shocks and shared temporal trends. This design leverages within-country changes in autocratization over time, relative to global patterns, to isolate the relationship of interest. By controlling for both country-specific and year-specific factors and clustering standard errors at the country level, the 2WFE model reduces—although not entirely eliminates—bias from omitted cross-sectional heterogeneity and provides more reliable estimates. As such, the equation is as follows: 𝐶𝑜𝑛𝑓𝑙𝑖𝑐𝑡+5 = 𝑎0 + 𝑎1𝐴𝑢𝑡𝑜𝑐𝑟𝑎𝑡𝑖𝑧𝑎𝑡𝑖𝑜𝑛−5 + 𝑎2𝑋it + 𝑐𝑖 + 𝑦𝑡 + 𝑒it (1) where 𝐶𝑜𝑛𝑓𝑙𝑖𝑐𝑡+5 is the probability of interstate conflict in the subsequent 5 years; 𝐴𝑢𝑡𝑜𝑐𝑟𝑎𝑡𝑖𝑧𝑎𝑡𝑖𝑜𝑛−5 is the autocratization variable that measures changes in democratic regression of a country over the past 5 years; 𝑋it is a vector of time-varying control variables mentioned in Section 3.4; and 𝑐𝑖, 𝑦𝑡, and 𝑒it are the country-fixed effect, year-fixed effect, and the error term, respectively. In addition to the baseline results, I also conduct a series of robustness check. First, I also conduct a heterogeneity analysis by disaggregating the composite democracy variable into five major V-Dem’s upper-level measure of democracy, which are electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian dimensions. This disaggregation aims to ensure that the results are not driven by a particular component of democracy and to verify the consistency of the findings across its five major dimensions— electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. By breaking down the composite variable, the analysis tests whether the observed effects hold across different conceptualizations of democracy, thereby enhancing the robustness and reliability of the results without focusing on the relative importance ofspecific dimensions. In addition, I employ alternative key variable operationalization. First, it utilizes Autocratization—Overall V2, which measures a reduction in V-Dem’s democracy score over the past 5 years. In this operationalization, following the approach of Panzano (2024), reductions in the democracy score are coded as positive values, while improvements or no changes are coded as 0. This approach specifically enables the identification and measurement of periods of democratic backsliding, highlighting instances where countries experience a decline in democratic quality over a defined timeframe. Likewise, I also incorporate Autocratization—Polity, which measures reductions in Polity V’s overall democracy score (ranging from −10 to 10, with higher values indicating greater democracy) over the past 5 years, coded similarly with reductions as positive values and improvements or no changes as 0. To refine the focus on democratic governance, Autocratization— Democracy Score (Polity) is used, capturing reductions in Polity V’s democracy component score (ranging from 0 to 10). Finally, Autocratization—Autocracy Score (Polity) measures increase in Polity V’s autocracy component score (also ranging from 0 to 10), with increases coded as positive values and decreases as negative values, providing insight into the strengthening of autocratic features. Assuch, these alternative key independent variable tests serve to examine whether the results are robust across different operationalizations and to assess whether the findings are driven by specific measures of democratic decline or autocratic rise. In addition, I employ an alternative dependent variable, Militarized Interstate Dispute, derived from the Correlates of War dataset by Palmer et al. (2022). This variable indicates whether a country is involved in an ongoing militarized interstate dispute in a given year, regardless of the dispute’s outcome, and is coded as 1 if involved and 0 otherwise. Although the dataset for this variable is limited to observations up to 2014, this robustness check serves to ensure that our results are not potentially driven by the specific operationalization of conflict involvement. Finally, this will employ alternative empirical modeling approaches—Logit, panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE), feasible generalized leastsquares(FGLS), and System generalized method of moments (System GMM)—to address potential issues and ensure robustness. I will use Logit to handle the binary dependent variable—the involvement in militarized interstate disputes in the next 5 years—ensuring appropriate modeling of probabilities. PCSE is helpful to account for heteroskedasticity and contemporaneous correlation in panel data, addressing potential biases in standard error estimates due to cross-sectional dependence. FGLS is also applied to correct for heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation, which could otherwise lead to inefficient and biased estimates. Finally, System GMM helps to address endogeneity concerns, particularly those arising from reverse causality or omitted variable bias, by incorporating lagged dependent variables and instrumental variables. By applying these alternative empirical data modeling, this helps to mitigate nonlinearity, panel data dependencies, and endogeneity, to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. 4 Results 4.1 Baseline Results Baseline estimates of Table 1 show that countries that autocratize over the prior 5 years face a higher risk of interstate war in the subsequent 5 years. The effect is small but statistically significant: a one-unit increase in autocratization is associated with a 0.07 percentage-point increase in the 5-year probability of interstate war (p = 0.020), indicating a positive relationship between autocratization and interstate conflict risk within the next 5 years. Figure A1 in the Supporting Information visualizes this relationship: as reductions in democracy deepen, the predicted probability of interstate war rises—and does so more steeply at higher levels of autocratization—with shaded bands indicating uncertainty. For example, the plot suggests that moving from no change to a 20-point reduction in democracy increases the expected 5-year war proportion of observations of observations engaging in interstate war from roughly 6%– 7% to about 13% (95% CI: 10%–17%). By contrast, a 10–15 point improvement in democratization is associated with a risk around 3%–5%. 4.2 Robustness Checks 4.2.1 Results Across Electoral, Liberal, Participatory, Deliberative, and Egalitarian Dimensions Table A2 in the Supporting Information shows that 5-year declines across all democratic dimensions are positively associated with the subsequent 5-year probability of interstate war, with statistically detectable effects in each model: electoral autocratization b = 0.0007 (SE = 0.0002, p < 0.01), liberal 0.0006 (0.0003, p < 0.05), participatory 0.0009 (0.0004, p < 0.05), deliberative 0.0005 (0.0003, p < 0.10), and egalitarian 0.0009 (0.0004, p < 0.05). The magnitudes are comparable across dimensions, indicating that the pattern is not likely driven by any single component of autocratization. 4.2.2 Effects of 5-Year Autocratization on War Risk Over 1–10 Subsequent Years Table A3 in the Supporting Information indicates that the association between 5-year autocratization and interstate war risk strengthens with longer post-change horizons: the coefficient is 0.0003 (SE = 0.0002) at 1 year and 0.0004 (0.0003) at 2 years (both not significant), reaches conventional significance at 3 years (0.0005, 0.0003, p < 0.10) and 4–6 years (0.0006–0.0007, 0.0003, p < 0.05), is marginal at 7–8 years (0.0006, 0.0003, p < 0.10), and is significant again at 9–10 years (0.0007–0.0008, 0.0003, p < 0.05). Substantively, a one-point decline corresponds to increases of roughly 0.5 percentage points at 3 years, 0.6– 0.7 points at 4–6 years, and 0.7–0.8 points at 9–10 years (about 1.0–1.6 points for a 20-point decline). This suggests that the association is most pronounced 4–10 years after the autocratization change. 4.2.3 Alternative Key Variable Measurements Table A4 in the Supporting Information presents sensitivity analyses using alternative autocratization measures and an alternative outcome. Across Models 1–4 (dependent variable is interstate war within 5 years), 5-year autocratization—coded as the positive part of the 5-year change with negative values set to zero—remains positively associated with subsequent interstate war risk, with a coefficient of 0.0019 (SE = 0.0006, p < 0.01). Meanwhile, autocratization as measured by the Polity V overall score is also associated with higher war risk (b = 0.0018, SE = 0.0007, p < 0.05), as are the Polity democracy component (b = 0.0025, SE = 0.0014, p < 0.10) and autocracy component (b = 0.0030, SE = 0.0014, p < 0.05). Likewise, using Militarized Interstate Dispute as an alternative dependent variable also yields a significant positive association (b = 0.0010, SE = 0.0006, p < 0.10) between autocratization and the likelihood of involvement in a militarized interstate dispute. Together, these results indicate that the pattern is robust across alternative measures of key independent variables and dependent variable. 4.2.4 Alternative Empirical Modelling Techniques Table A5 in the Supporting Information indicates that the association between 5-year autocratization and the subsequent 5-year probability of interstate war remains positive across estimators: in the logit model b = 0.0138 (SE = 0.0070, p < 0.05); in linear probability models with PCSE and FGLS b = 0.0005 (SE = 0.0003, p < 0.10) and b = 0.0014 (SE = 0.0003, p < 0.01), respectively; and in a dynamic system GMM specification b = 0.0004 (SE = 0.0002, p < 0.05), with a highly persistent lagged dependent variable b = 0.6883 (SE = 0.0061, p < 0.01). The PCSE and FGLS estimates are consistent with the result not being driven by heteroskedasticity or contemporaneous cross-sectional dependence, and the system GMM diagnostics—AR(1) p = 0.0000, AR(2) p = 0.1950, Sargan p = 0.6940—are consistent with a plausible dynamic specification and instrument set. Overall, these checks reduce—but do not eliminate—concerns about endogeneity arising from persistence or reverse causality.

**<Integrity Returns>**

4.2.5 | Summary of Findings

Across all checks, the results point to a consistent pattern: countries that autocratize over a 5-year window face a higher probability of interstate war in the subsequent 5 years, with small but statistically meaningful effects that increase as democracy declines. This finding is robust to alternative operationalizations of regime change and conflict (e.g., V-Dem dimensions, Polity, Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs)), different horizons, and multiple estimators (logit, PCSE, FGLS, System GMM). Diagnostic checks further indicate that it is not driven by heteroskedasticity, cross-sectional dependence, or mis-specified dynamics, mitigating—though not eliminating—endogeneity concerns.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 | Reasons for the Results With Examples

I argue that the results correspond closely with the mechanism predicted by selectorate theory, which links leaders’ foreign policy behavior to domestic political survival rather than to external structural forces. In this framework, a leader’s tenure depends on maintaining the support of a winning coalition (W) drawn from a broader selectorate (S) (De Mesquita et al. 2004; Ko and Leung 2026). The ratio between these groups (W/S) captures how widely power is distributed: when W is large, leaders must govern in the interests of the wider public; when W is small, survival depends on rewarding insiders who control critical political, economic, or coercive resources.

Autocratization systematically alters this balance by contracting W relative to S, shifting the basis of regime survival from broad legitimacy to elite dependence. As institutional checks weaken and accountability declines, political loyalty rather than institutional performance becomes the principal currency of power. For the general population, war remains a public bad with widespread economic and human costs. For insiders— military officers, party elites, and business patrons—conflict can generate selective gains such as expanded budgets, promotions, or privileged access to state contracts (Brito and Intriligator 1985). This divergence of incentives weakens domestic constraints that typically discourage aggression, making the use of external force a rational strategy to preserve internal cohesion and distribute elite rewards.

As W/S declines, leaders become less dependent on popular approval and more attentive to the interests of a narrow inner circle. The political risks of conflict therefore diminish: its costs are dispersed among politically excluded groups, while its rewards accrue to those whose loyalty secures the regime (Weeks 2012). Under these conditions, external coercion serves both strategic and domestic functions—providing opportunities to allocate rents, reward powerful supporters, and project decisiveness within an elite‑driven system. These changes unfold gradually, consistent with the incremental nature of autocratization. The observed 4‑ to 10‑year lag between democratic backsliding and interstate conflict onset reflects the slow contraction of W/S and the institutional adjustments that accompany it. As executives consolidate authority, politicize the security apparatus, and weaken oversight, the effective selectorate continues to shrink while loyalty networks become entrenched. A progressively smaller W/S renders conflict increasingly attractive: private benefits tied to war grow, while public opposition loses political relevance. Over time, leaders in low‑W/S contexts face fewer domestic barriers and greater incentives to employ external conflict as a tool of coalition management—redistributing resources, reinforcing elite cohesion, and demonstrating indispensability within an increasingly confined power structure (Gent 2009; Maoz and Russett 1993; Tschantret 2020).

Russia provides a clear illustration of how a declining W/S ratio reconfigures these incentives. Since 2000, Vladimir Putin’s consolidation of power progressively narrowed the selectorate, concentrating influence within loyal networks of security officials, political managers, and economic elites. Reforms that reasserted federal control over governors, curtailed independent media, and replaced regional elections with presidential appointments marginalized opposition and regional actors from decision‑making. By the 2010s, this structure had become institutionalized through the entrenchment of the siloviki, the creation of the National Guard, and restrictions on nongovernmental organizations(NGOs) and foreign funding (Snegovaya 2023). The effective selectorate thus contracted into a narrow elite benefiting directly from state patronage, defense contracts, and control over information flows. Wars in Georgia (2008), Crimea and Donbas (2014), and Ukraine (2022) yielded material and symbolic benefits for these insiders, from increased budgets to enhanced political dominance. As loyalty replaced performance as the currency of survival, military aggression became a predictable outcome of elite maintenance—precisely the selectorate‑theory logic (Casier 2025; Klimovich 2023).

A similar process is evident in Israel. Democratic backsliding that accelerated in the late 2010s and early 2020s created the conditions for a narrowing selectorate under Benjamin Netanyahu’s governments. Efforts to weaken institutional checks and expand executive authority—most notably the 2023–2024 judicial overhaul proposals and increased political oversight of law enforcement—reduced accountability and concentrated power in the executive. As constraints eroded, the government grew more dependent on Netanyahu’s small, ideologically cohesive partners. Reliance on blocs such as Shas, United Torah Judaism, and Religious Zionism/Otzma Yehudit made these factions indispensable, while electoral influence outside these groups declined. A compact alliance of religious and nationalist elites gained leverage by trading support for concessions such as financial transfers to Haredi constituencies, settlement‑expansion policies, and judicial reforms (Shultziner 2023). As the W/S ratio contracted, Netanyahu’s selectorate became smaller, more ideologically uniform, and increasingly tied to the security sector. His push to extend executive control—tightening influence over the police and proposing a National Guard within the National Security Ministry—further centralized coercive capacity within the ruling bloc. In this environment, interstate conflicts—such as Israeli airstrikes in Syria, operations in Gaza, and direct exchanges with Iran during the 2025 Twelve‑Day War—served not only strategic but also domestic political functions (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2025). These campaigns redistributed benefits to core supporters, reinforced elite cohesion, and demonstrated executive resolve. As W shrinks relative to S, Israeli leaders increasingly prioritize coalition unity over public accountability, heightening the structural tendency to rely on interstate conflict for political stability (Weeks 2012).

Across both cases, the evidence reveals a common mechanism: as autocratization compresses the W/S ratio, leaders’ political survival becomes anchored within narrow elite networks, reducing the domestic costs and heightening the incentives to employ force. This shift represents a “peace penalty” of autocratization— where the very processes that strengthen regime durability internally also expand the state’s propensity to initiate interstate war. By reshaping the political economy of survival, autocratization lowers the perceived domestic price of aggression while magnifying its political returns, making external conflict an increasingly attractive strategy for preserving power.

#### Civil breakdown triggers nuclear war in every theater.

Paul B. Stares 24. General John Vessey senior fellow in conflict prevention and director of the Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations, Ph.D. from Lancaster University. "In this turbulent year, peace has to start at home for the United States." The Hill. 1/13/2024. thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4404888-in-this-turbulent-year-peace-has-to-start-at-home-for-the-united-states

For the first time since the survey began 16 years ago, three of the 30 conflict-related risks that respondents were asked to assess were judged to be both highly threatening to U.S. interests and highly likely to occur over the next 12 months.

Most shockingly, by far the leading concern for 2024 is not an overseas conflict or foreign threat but a homegrown one: potential domestic terrorism and other forms of political violence in the United States, especially around the upcoming presidential election.

That so many American foreign policy experts now worry about the impact of domestic terrorism and political violence in the United States is telling. Beyond the immediate threat to life and liberty at home, they almost certainly fret over a wider set of risks to U.S. interests.

For a start, America’s ability to promote democracy abroad, which is so important to a more stable and prosperous world, will take an immediate and potentially lasting hit. To state the obvious, it will be hard to advocate for peaceful elections and orderly government transitions in other countries when the United States cannot practice what it preaches. Authoritarian rivals will not miss a beat to highlight the contradiction if not hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy.

More worrisome is the risk that America’s adversaries — whether it’s states or non-state actors — will take advantage of America’s internal divisions to not only sow further discord in the country (particularly through provocative disinformation on social media) but also pursue their local or regional aims to the detriment of U.S. interests.

As the CFR survey’s results also make abundantly clear, this is not a good time for the United States to be distracted by internal political turmoil.

Besides domestic terrorism and political violence, respondents were particularly concerned with two other pressing issues: the potential for the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas to escalate into a wider regional conflict as well as surging migration across the southern border driven in part by criminal violence, economic hardship and political corruption in Mexico and Central America.

And if these concerns are not vexing enough to the United States, others are not far behind in the overall ranking.

The ongoing war in Ukraine, which has already cost hundreds of thousands of lives, could escalate in several very dangerous ways. Likewise, tensions between Taiwan and China that have been steadily rising in recent years could easily morph into open conflict, especially around Taiwan’s upcoming presidential election. The possibility of a military confrontation between Israel and Iran due to the latter’s support for various militant groups in the region along with its continuing interest in acquiring nuclear weapons, also remains a serious concern.

Meanwhile, North Korea shows no sign of becoming any less belligerent toward the United States and now has an arsenal of nuclear weapons to threaten U.S. allies in the region and even U.S. territory.

These conflict-related risks, it should be emphasized, constitute just the top-tier concerns for U.S. policymakers. Experts surveyed 30 plausible contingencies in 2024 and only two of them were considered to have a low probability of occurring.

Clearly, the United States should try to avert the worst from happening through timely preventive action, preferably with help from allies and partners. While this task may appear overwhelming given current trends, it is not foreordained that the world will grow more disorderly.

The United States has demonstrated on many occasions the will and capacity to keep the peace and restore order around the world. This will become nigh on impossible to do, however, if America succumbs to further political polarization and, worse, deadly violence in 2024. In this sense, conflict prevention must now begin at home.

#### But, no turns: the admin state solves every objection to democracy.

Edward Rubin 25. Distinguished university professor of law and political science at Vanderbilt University. "Responsive Democracy and the Administrative State." *Case Western Reserve Law Review*, 75(3), 949-955.

In this situation, how can we create a government that responds to the needs and desires of the people? At the highest policy level, involving war and peace, civil rights, discrimination, criminal liability, wealth distribution, level of regulation, and control over one’s body and intimate relationships, people are capable of understanding the issues and making their own decisions. Some observers may bemoan voter ignorance, but these accusations are often based on unreasonable expectations or externally imposed standards of rationality.94 At the level of government operations involving the regulation of working conditions, consumer products and the environment, as well as the delivery of education, health care, and social welfare, however, it is impossible for people to be sufficiently knowledgeable to determine how their interests can be served by government. This does not apply only to the proverbial “ordinary person” but to everyone. The expert who understands the complexities of radio broadcasting cannot possibly be informed about the safe levels of cadmium in workplaces or the proper design of anti-lock brakes. Many observers draw dark conclusions about the effect of this situation on the human spirit and the future of civil society; Habermas memorably describes it as “the colonization of the lifeworld.”95 However one assesses it, the fact is that it is here to stay, and democratic governments must find ways to deal with it.

The mechanism for doing so, the pragmatic instrument of government that operates at the operational level of policy implementation rather than policy formation, is the administrative agency. Because they have defined areas of jurisdiction, full-time staff with training and experience in their particular area, operational budgets, and institutional continuity, agencies have the capacity to understand and control the technological processes that exist in modern society. They are only a mechanism, to be sure, but as explicated in the previous section, elected representatives are only a mechanism as well. Both elected representatives and administrative agencies are historically generated institutions that democratic societies have deployed to achieve their underlying political goal, which is to establish a responsive government. Representatives are expected to respond to the desires of people directly, through the process of election. Agencies must respond indirectly. Their task is to do what the people would want them to do if the people had the knowledge necessary to issue direct instructions in some manner. Because such knowledge is impossible, it is the agency’s task, using its expertise, to discern what the people would desire.

The basic features of administrative agencies flow directly from their role in providing a responsive government in technologically complex areas. When the Framers drafted the Constitution, they created three functionally defined branches or institutions of government that were each responsible for the entire range of government action. According to the high school civics formulation, the legislature makes the law, the judiciary interprets the law, and the executive enforces the law.96 Agencies, in order to perform their function, need a different mode of organization, which is specialization in a substantive subject area. In each area of specialization, all three functions must be combined; the agency needs to make law through regulations, interpret the law through adjudication, and enforce the law through executive action.97 Agencies can only regulate a substantive area effectively if they are able to combine all three functions. To further divide them, so that one agency makes the rules in a given subject area, another interprets them, and a third enforces them, would undermine our ability to exercise control over that area.98

A government institution cannot even participate in the discourse of the area that it is trying to govern unless it possesses the expertise to function at the advancing edge of knowledge in that area. If, for example, it is regulating pesticides or airplane safety, it is impossible to even talk to the decision-makers in those areas without possessing a level of knowledge and training equivalent to the executives and cutting-edge technicians in the area. It certainly is impossible to intervene effectively without that level of expertise. Of course, we want more; we want the administrators to make the right decisions, to act in a manner that achieves the results that people want. Clearly, that requires an even higher level of expertise. But unless the agency possesses enough expertise to be technologically literate in the area that it is regulating, it could not even initiate an effort to achieve desirable results. Presented with three elaborately developed alternatives, any person could simply choose one of the three. But who would listen to a person who simply pointed to one choice without knowing what each of the choices involved?

While the advent of administrative agencies can be attributed to the same desire to serve the people that led to the advent of representative institutions, an insistent question is how this purpose can be maintained. Those who wield power, if not controlled by some external force, tend to serve their own interests rather than the ones they are supposed to serve, a problem that is amplified by Jacques Ellul’s observation that technology itself displays a self-sustaining dynamic.99 The leaders of administrative agencies cannot be elected, not only for the obvious reason that there are simply too many for the voting public to evaluate, but also for the more structural reason that the rationale for relying on agencies is that they deal with areas that about which the public cannot possibly be knowledgeable. A crucial question, then, is how administrative agencies can be controlled in the absence of elections, the mechanism that democratic government relies on in inducing officials at the policymaking level to implement its basic purpose.

Most basically, the answer is intrinsic in the design of administrative agencies, and so well accepted that one might say that there is no problem at all. Elected representatives set the general policy of government, making major decisions on the basis of their mission to respond to the citizenry’s desires and subject to dismissal if they fail in that purpose. Administrative agents then implement these policies under the direction of the elected representatives, and subject to a variety of controls: appointment and dismissal by the chief executive, impeachment by the legislature, direct instructions by the chief executive, oversight, budgetary control, and alteration of statutory authority by the legislature.100 All of these controls, however, leave a great deal of discretion to administrative agents, in part because the administrative apparatus is simply too extensive for an individual or a relatively small policy-making body to control, but mainly because the demands of knowledge that made the creation of that apparatus essential preclude comprehensive control by the generalists who are elected by the public. Agencies, not by inadvertence but design, exercise a great deal of authority in the modern state, and the issue is how they can be induced to serve the public in the absence of electoral discipline.

One solution that can be readily rejected is that this effort is impossible, and that administrative agencies should be severely restricted or even eliminated in a democratic government. As I have suggested elsewhere,101 most of these global condemnations of administrative government, including the works that are considered classics in the field, engage in outright misrepresentation and thus fall below the standard of academic scholarship. Friedrich Hayek’s Road to Serfdom, for example, condemns socialism on the ground that it requires central planning and thus leads to totalitarian control of the society.102 A minor defect of this argument is that it is false; socialism, a system where the state owns the means of production, does not require central planning because the state can delegate control to the institutions it owns.103 The major defect in Hayek’s argument is that he applies it to British progressives, who only briefly flirted with limited state ownership, and to American progressives, who have never seriously contemplated it.104 Progressives favor government regulation of industrial firms, something that would not be necessary if the government owned the firms. Other global arguments against agencies are equally defective. Robert Nozick asserts that taxation is “on par with” forced labor;105 Richard Epstein revives the rejected substantive due process argument that our constitutional principles restrict general regulatory laws regulating property,106 and purposely ignores the universally accepted Supreme Court decision that explicitly rejects this argument;107 Philip Hamburger claims that administrative governance by the executive is an outgrowth of the British monarch’s royal prerogative,108 ignoring the fact that the head of our executive is elected, and then declares that this prerogative was an exceptional assertion of the first two Stuart monarchs (1603–1649),109 when in fact it was a fixture of British royal government from the time of the Conquest at least110 and was only terminated in the 1780s and 90s by William Pitt.111 Milton Friedman’s condemnation of agencies for impairing the freedom of entrepreneurs112 is little better than a play on words; laws against abortion, birth control, and LGBTQ relationships, which he never mentions, do violate people’s freedom, but economic regulation of the conditions that entrepreneurs create for their workers, the quality of products they sell to consumers, and their impact on the environment can only be said to impede freedom if that term includes the ability to control others (“I should be free to have everyone follow my religion,” “I should be free of other people’s views that disagree with mine”), an obviously incorrect usage.

The reason global condemnations of administrative agencies must resort to dishonest arguments is that the administrative apparatus is a necessary component of any modern government, and a necessary component of any democratic government that aspires to respond to the needs and desires of its citizens, as argued above.113 The problem of controlling agencies so that they serve their intended purpose cannot be solved by eliminating or radically restricting them. The realistic solution that is most commonly advanced is to amplify chief executive and legislative control, or to provide channels of direct control by interested members of the public. An example of the former is the Executive Order requiring agencies to submit their regulations for cost-benefit evaluation to an office under the President’s direct control.114 An example of the latter is the Administrative Procedure Act’s notice and comment procedure for agency promulgation of regulations.115

### Plan---1AC

#### The United States federal government should substantially strengthen collective bargaining rights for civil servants in the United States.

### Solvency---1AC

#### Finally: SOLVENCY.

#### The aff strikes down Trump’s EOs on the basis that he violated the will of Congress.

Alejandro Perez 25. J.D. Candidate at Boston University, B.A. in political science and sociology from Boston College. “The Return of Schedule F and the Perils of Mandating Loyalty in the Civil Service.” *Boston University Law Review*, 104(7), 2233-2265.

2. Presidential Administrative Actions that Conflict with the Will of Congress Ought to Be Struck Down

The second proposed framework centers on the notion that Trump may have acted in contrast to the will of Congress when issuing Schedule F. As a starting point, it is generally accepted that executive orders that conflict with the Constitution or the intent of Congress are invalid.145 This principle stems from Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer, 146 a 1952 case where the Supreme Court invalidated President Harry S. Truman’s executive order authorizing the seizure of the nation’s steel mills during the Korean War.147 Youngstown stands for the idea that “when an executive order conflicts with a statute, the statute preempts the order.”148 In a concurring opinion, Justice Jackson wrote: “When the President takes measures incompatible with the expressed or implied will of Congress, his power is at its lowest ebb . . . . Courts can sustain exclusive Presidential control in such a case only by disabling the Congress from acting upon the subject.”149

How might a court disable Congress from acting? Simply by holding a particular act of Congress unconstitutional.150 It follows from Justice Jackson’s reasoning that, if a statute and executive order are in conflict with one another, the executive order would prevail only if the statute were found unconstitutional.151 If the statute is deemed invalid, then “Courts can sustain exclusive Presidential control.”152

As applied here, Schedule F and the CSRA are directly at odds. The former stipulates that federal employees are removable at will, while the latter provides that federal employees are protected from such removals. James Sherk has argued that all civil service legislation, including the CSRA, may be unconstitutional.153 According to Sherk, Schedule F would have to prevail over the CSRA. This point can be easily dismissed, however, given the numerous times that the Supreme Court has recognized the legality of the CSRA.154

Given its unequivocal constitutionality, courts should adhere to the principle that the CSRA takes precedence over Trump’s incompatible Schedule F order. An illustrative case is Chamber of Commerce v. Reich, 155 where the United States Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit directly applied this principle.156 In that case, the court overturned President Bill Clinton’s executive order that disqualified employers from certain federal contracts if they hired permanent replacement workers during lawful strikes.157 Clinton implemented the order pursuant to the Procurement Act, claiming that the law bestowed on the President the power to “set procurement policy for the entire government.”158 However, the court ruled that Clinton’s action conflicted with—and was therefore preempted by—the National Labor Relations Act, which guarantees employers the right to hire permanent replacement workers as an offset to the employees’ right to strike.159 This case underscores the principle that an executive order cannot supersede statutory protections established by Congress.

Returning to Schedule F, it is important to note that Trump appeared to quote directly from 5 U.S.C. § 7511(b)(2) when attempting to remove civil service protections from individuals in “confidential, policy-determining, policymaking, or policy-advocating positions.”160 However, to issue such an order would be to separate this phrase from its historical context.161 The plain text and legislative history of the CSRA indicate that the “confidential, policydetermining, policy-making, or policy-advocating positions” provision refers exclusively to noncareer, political appointees. As previously discussed, political appointees serve at the pleasure of the President and may be dismissed at any time; they are therefore excluded from the CSRA’s removal protections.162 However, Congress intended the phrase “confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating” to explicitly exclude career civil servants from its ambit, and these individuals are protected by the CSRA.163

The circumstances surrounding the enactment of the CSRA lend further support to this interpretation. To provide context, we must first go back two years prior to the CSRA’s passage, when the Supreme Court deliberated on the constitutionality of politically motivated dismissals of public employees in Elrod v. Bruns. 164 In his concurrence, Justice Stewart explained that “nonpolicymaking, nonconfidential government employee[s]” cannot be “discharged or threatened with discharge from a job that [they are] satisfactorily performing upon the sole ground of [their] political beliefs.”165 With this background in mind, the CSRA’s legislative history indicates that civil service protections do not apply to “positions which require Senate confirmation” and “positions of a confidential, policy-determining, policy-making or policy advocating character . . . [which are] extension[s] of the exception for appointments confirmed by the Senate.”166 This language suggests that Congress meant to equate that particular term to Senate-confirmed political appointees. The Merit Systems Protection Board has regularly adopted this interpretation as well.167

Congress made some changes to the CSRA through the Civil Service Due Process Amendments Act of 1990, which expanded removal protections to excepted service employees.168 The legislative history of this new law also acted to “retain the exclusion for political appointees.”169 Specifically, the history notes:

[T]he key to the distinction between those to whom appeal rights are extended and those to whom such rights are not extended is the expectation of continuing employment with the Federal Government. Lawyers, teachers, chaplains, and scientists have such expectations; presidential appointees and temporary workers do not. . . . Schedule C, positions of a confidential or policy-determining character. . . . are political appointees who are specifically excluded from coverage under section 7511(b) of title 5. H.R. 3086 does not change the fact that these individuals do not have appeal rights.170

With this language, Congress reaffirmed that the “confidential, policydetermining, policy-making or policy-advocating” terminology applied exclusively to political appointees, as well as temporary workers (who are also not career civil service employees).

Viewed through this lens, Trump’s improper application of the term “confidential, policy-determining, policy-making or policy-advocating” to describe positions held by career civil service employees “would be contrary to congressional intent and decades of applicable case law and practice.”171 Such a move undermines Congress’s careful balance of “the need for long-term employees who have knowledge of the history, mission, and operations of their agencies with the need of the President for individuals in positions who will ensure that the specific policies of the Administration will be pursued.”172

Additionally, the enabling statutes cited by Trump in his order—5 U.S.C. §§ 3301, 3302, and 7511—do not explicitly grant him the power to eliminate civil service protections for employees or to terminate them at will.173 Section 3301 permits the President to “prescribe such regulations for the admission of individuals into the civil service in the executive branch” and to “ascertain the fitness of applicants as to age, health, character, knowledge, and ability for the employment sought.”174 Section 3302 relates to allowing the President to except “positions from the competitive service” when “conditions of good administration warrant” it.175 This language alone does not “purport to confer authority on the President to except positions from the scope of [civil service protections].”176

Likewise, nothing in the text of Section 7511 grants this authority to the President.177 A thorough examination of the legislative history related to Section 7511 also reveals no mention of such an authority.178 Supreme Court precedent dictates that where a statute is silent as to conferring the President with the power to remove a certain class of federal employee, the President cannot claim such action.179 Accordingly, based on the frameworks established in Youngstown and Reich, and as a matter of statutory interpretation, Schedule F would have to be struck down as a violation of the will of Congress by the President.

#### Unions are…

#### 1. Sufficient.

#### Personnel is policy. Only collective bargaining unlocks expert bureaucracy.

Nicholas Bednar 26. Associate professor of law at the University of Minnesota Law School, Ph.D. in political science from Vanderbilt University, J.D. from the University of Minnesota Law School. "Presidential Control of the Civil Service." *Minnesota Law Review*, Forthcoming 2026, 49-54.

C. Restrictions on Unions

The Federal Labor-Management Relations Statute reflects Congress’s belief that federal labor unions provide certain benefits to the federal workforce. Nevertheless, President Trump has used his authority to undermine the ability of employees to unionize.

During his first administration, President Trump signed three executive orders aimed at curtailing the influence of federal labor unions in the workplace. 361 He declared that the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute must be “interpreted in a manner consistent with the requirement of an effective and efficient government.”362 Citing his authority under Section 7301, President Trump barred employees from using agency resources for union-related activities.363 He further limited “union time” to no more than one hour per week, encouraged agencies to pursue removal rather than suspension for misconduct, and sought to restrict the availability of grievance procedures.364 These restrictions were reinstated during his second term, underscoring his sustained effort to diminish union influence within the federal workforce.365

In addition to limiting union activities, during his second term, President Trump significantly expanded the number of “national-security” agencies excluded from the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute under Section 7103(b). Invoking this provision, President Trump excluded employees in the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Communications Commission, and many other agencies from the protections afforded by the Federal LaborManagement Relations Statute. 366 By one estimate, the order would strip more than a million employees—nearly half of the federal workforce—of their collective bargaining rights.367

**<Condensed>**

While the connection of these agencies to national-security matters is limited, courts have generally deferred to President Trump’s determinations. 368 In American Federation of Government Employees v. Trump, the U.S. Court of Appeals of the Ninth Circuit held that the Trump administration was likely to show that these exceptions were a lawful exercise of the president’s authority.369 The district court had found “serious questions” suggesting that President Trump’s order was retaliatory against unions that had criticized the President. The Ninth Circuit, however, held that the government was likely to succeed on the merits because, even assuming a retaliatory motive, the record showed the President “would have taken the same action even in the absence of the protected conduct.”370 It emphasized that the order demonstrated a facially legitimate national security purpose rather than unlawful viewpoint discrimination. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit similarly held that enjoining the president “ties the government’s hands … in the national security context,” that any harm to unions could be remedied later, and that maintaining the stay served “the public interest by preserving the President’s autonomy under a statute that expressly recognizes his national security expertise.”371 D. Punishing Political Opponents This Article would be remiss, however, if it failed to acknowledge the very clear ways in which President Trump has violated the constitutional and statutory rights of federal employees. While an entirely separate Article could be written about those violations, just one example suffices for the moment. On March 6, 2025, President Trump issued an executive order imposing sanctions on the law firm Perkins Coie for “representing failed Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton” and collaborating with “activist donors including George Soros to judicially overturn popular, necessary, and democratically enacted election laws.”372 The order included a requirement that agencies “refrain from hiring employees of Perkins Coie, absent a waiver from the head of the agency, made in consultation with the Director of the Office of Personnel Management, that such hire will not threaten the national security of the United States.” 373 In a challenge to the lawsuit, Judge Beryl Howell granted summary judgment in favor of Perkins Coie, finding that the executive order was unconstitutional under the First, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments.374 Whether one views the Trump administration’s approach to personnel management as lawful or not ultimately turns on one’s interpretive commitments. Those who emphasize statutory purpose readily perceive the ways in which the Trump administration’s personnel policies undermine the spirit and structure of the civil service laws. 375 By contrast, a more formalist or textualist approach can plausibly view these actions as consistent with the statute’s broad text and with the president’s Article II authority to manage the executive branch—regardless of whether the interpreter perceives these policies as normatively desirable. Even when courts ultimately decide that the president’s policies are unlawful, the delay inherent in litigation can allow the very maladministration sought to engineer to occur anyway. Questions so existential to the functioning of the modern administrative state should not hinge on interpretive methodology alone. The stability of the civil service cannot depend on the president’s willingness to adhere to norms of good governance and the courts’ selection of a particular means of interpreting statutory law. Unless Congress clarifies the limits of presidential authority, the fate of the civil service will continue to rise or fall on interpretive happenstance rather than durable legal constraint. IV. Implications And A More Stable Equilibrium The Trump administration has exposed the fragility of the civil service and the risks inherent in the statutory authority vested in the president. Preventing administrative sabotage requires renewed recognition of Congress’s role in structuring the civil service. Richard Neustadt famously described the Constitution as creating “a government of separating institutions sharing powers” rather than one of “separated powers.”376 The overlapping constitutional powers of Congress and the president have long rendered the struggle for administrative control a political contest waged through law, rather than a straightforward division of responsibility fixed by constitutional text. 377 Consequently, the distribution of administrative power has ebbed and flowed throughout American history.378 Changes to the current balance of power over the civil service remain both feasible and appropriate. The political case for renewing Congress’s role requires reframing how legal scholars think about the civil service. Modern debates often center questions of policy control and subvert discussions of administrative capacity. Fundamentally, the civil service exists to ensure that the executive branch has the administrative capacity necessary to faithfully execute the laws enacted by Congress.379 Centering administrative capacity—rather than policy control—thus clarifies why Congress has a strong claim to restraining presidential authority over the civil service: The civil service is the mechanism by which Congress’s legislative authority is realized.

**<Integrity Returns>**

A. Threats to Congressional Power

Personnel policy is central to legislative design: it shapes who interprets statutes, how faithfully agencies carry out statutory mandates, and whether the federal government possesses the administrative capacity necessary to transform statutory commands into meaningful policy outcomes. When presidents exercise their authority to reshape hiring rules or diminish the size and expertise of the federal workforce, they effectively rewrite the terms of implementation without altering the underlying statutes. Congress has a compelling political and legal claim to assert stronger structural control over the personnel system that gives its legislation practical effect.

1. Personnel Is Policy

Congress must legislate against the background of policy implementation. Legal scholars have long recognized that procedural design shapes the substantive outcomes produced by law. 380 Congress deliberately crafts procedure—such as notice-and-comment rulemaking and judicial review—to channel agencies toward decisions grounded in expertise and deliberation rather than politics or expedience. 381 Procedure thus functions not merely as a set of technical requirements but as an integral part of Congress’s legislative strategy.382 Yet the personnel who follow these procedures often exert substantial influence over the policy outcomes produced. 383 As Michael Lipsky observed, “the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out.”384

Personnel policy determines who implements law and what incentives shape their choices. A merit system attracts individuals with specialized knowledge, professional training, and long-term career incentives to invest in their competence and judgment. A spoils system, by contrast, prioritizes loyalty over expertise and encourages employees to align their behavior with the preferences of the president rather than the substantive demands of statutory law. These structural choices shape not only the skill set of the workforce but also the incentives that guide day-to-day decisionmaking. In this sense, personnel policy is part and parcel of legislative design. By determining who implements the law, Congress shapes the normative commitments that guide implementation.

Modern administrative governance often requires the federal government to hire employees from varied professional backgrounds. Employees must work in teams of experts to tackle complex policy problems related to the environment, banking, immigration, healthcare, and a myriad of other issues touched upon by federal law. Each profession brings its own norms, expectations, and methods to performing this work.385 Attorneys, for example, operate within a professional culture shaped by ethical duties—such as duties of candor, confidentiality, and independent judgment—that influence how they approach legal analysis and advise decisionmakers.386 Michael Herz has explained that agency attorneys often confront a tension between “the obligation (and personal desire) to facilitate the president’s or the agency head’s policy program, on the one hand, and the obligation to ensure that the program proceeds within legal limits, on the other.”387 Scientists, economists, and engineers likewise rely on disciplinary standards that guide how they collect evidence, evaluate competing claims, and make policy recommendations.388

For better or worse, the professional norms that employees bring with them help shape an agency’s culture and, in turn, influence how it carries out the authority delegated to it by Congress. 389 Changes to the Postal Service’s personnel structure in the nineteenth century transformed it into a more professionalized organization whose growing expertise and reputation enabled meaningful policy innovation and more reliable, efficient service delivery.390 Of course, Congress sometimes seeks to conserve resources by assigning new responsibilities to existing agencies—even when those agencies’ cultures may relegate the new policy to a secondary priority. 391 The IRS, for instance, is staffed largely by accountants whose fiscal conservatism sometimes creates “obstacles to accomplishing congressional goals of alleviating poverty, improving access to health care, or encouraging the pursuits of the nonprofit sector.” 392 Even if one disagrees with Congress’s policy choices, they are choices that Congress—not the president—must make when drafting legislation.

Congress has legitimate reasons to cultivate a workforce capable of faithfully implementing its laws, policies, and programs. Members of Congress are generalists who often lack the specialized expertise needed to address modern policy problems. Indeed, they regularly rely on the civil service’s knowledge and experience when drafting legislative proposals. 393At the same time, Congress worries that agencies may exercise delegated authority in ways that diverge from legislative preferences. 394 To mitigate these principal-agent problems, the enacting coalition seeks to embed certain normative commitments within the agency. Personnel choices serve as a cultural constraint that helps bind the executive branch to those commitments. Personnel policy is therefore inextricably intertwined with legislative design. In some cases, Congress might well have drafted a different statute—or declined to legislate altogether—had it anticipated an agency workforce guided by different normative commitments.

Congress’ ability to cultivate a workforce with certain expertise, experience, and professional norms requires a personnel system capable of recruiting and retaining certain types of employees. Civil service protections foster the sort of stability and autonomy that attract expert and experienced individuals to government. 395 Without these structural guarantees, the workforce becomes more susceptible to politicization through patronage efforts. As politicization increases, federal employees invest less in their own professional development and express a greater desire to leave public service396 Congress’s own legislative authority, therefore, depends on its ability to set personnel policy.

At times, presidential control of the civil service undermines the legislative bargain by steering agencies toward hiring employees who lack the normative commitments Congress assumed would guide implementation. The continual pursuit of political control and patronage creates a workforce increasingly responsive to the president’s immediate policy agenda at the expense of expertise, stability, and professional norms. Policies such as Schedule C, Schedule G, and Schedule Policy/Career illustrate this trend: each seeks to heighten responsiveness to presidential priorities while diminishing the expertise Congress expects to anchor administration. Defending the merit system is thus important not only because it improves government performance but also because Congress itself embraced merit to ensure that its laws would be carried out by qualified and expert employees.

#### Meta-analyses vote AFF…

Kohei Suzuki 25. Assistant professor of public administration at Leiden University, Ph.D. in public policy from Indiana University. "Government efficiency or administrative backsliding?: warning signs from global experience with administrative decline." *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 47(2), 91-94.

The second Trump administration has initiated unprecedented reforms of the federal civil service system. On inauguration day, 20 January 2025, President Trump established the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), launching a dramatic transformation of federal workforce management. Within its first month, the administration has implemented a three-pronged strategy: a near-total hiring freeze, a deferred resignation programme, and widespread terminations without regard for individual performance or position criticality. The scale and speed of these reductions are without precedent in American administrative history (Schoop, 2025).1

The most controversial aspect of these reforms is the “Schedule Policy/Career” classification, a revised version of Schedule F that would create a new category of readily dismissible political appointees. This change could expand the number of political appointments more than tenfold, affecting approximately 50,000 federal employees. These reforms reflect Trump’s first-term experiences, where his policy agenda was reportedly impeded by what his allies termed the “deep state” - career civil servants resistant to his directives (Fukuyama, 2024). The administration’s clear aim is to replace career bureaucrats with officials more aligned with its agenda.

While such reforms might yield short-term efficiency gains and expenditure cuts, they raise serious concerns about the long-term consequences for bureaucratic autonomy and institutional capacity. The fundamental question is whether these changes will truly create an “efficient government” and “make America great again” or instead undermine the professional foundations of American public administration.

To address this question, we must consider why professional bureaucracies are essential to modern governance. Effective policy implementation requires both political direction and administrative expertise. While elected officials establish broad policy goals, they lack the specialised knowledge needed for the thousands of technical decisions that government operations demand daily. Career civil servants bridge this gap, providing the expertise and continuity necessary for effective public service delivery.

Career civil servants’ expertise becomes evident when we examine the complex tasks of modern governance. Daily operations include activities like collecting pension premiums, analysing economic data, implementing financial regulations, and managing defence procurement. These functions demand not just specialised knowledge but years of practical experience and institutional understanding – qualities that cannot be rapidly replaced or replicated.

The effective functioning of democratic governance thus depends on a careful balance: elected officials provide policy direction while professional bureaucrats handle technical implementation. Critical decisions – from monetary policy to drug safety certification – require deep technical expertise rather than political judgement (Fukuyama, 2024). When politicians overreach into these technical domains, their limited specialised knowledge and focus on short-term political gains often leads to suboptimal or even harmful outcomes.

While the need for professional bureaucracy is universal, countries vary considerably in how they balance political leadership and administrative expertise. A 2020 expert survey by the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, offers valuable insights into these differences, measuring how strongly countries adhere to merit-based principles in their personnel practices (Nistotskaya et al., 2021). Their survey data in Figure 1 reveals significant variation across OECD member and Asian countries and regions, with higher scores indicating stronger merit-based practices and correspondingly lower levels of political intervention in personnel decisions.

Under merit-based systems, civil service appointments primarily depend on educational background and professional experience rather than political connections. Countries like Norway, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, and Japan have developed particularly robust merit-based practices. The American system stands out especially among developed nations for its relatively extensive use of political appointments higher degrees of political interference in personnel matters. The contrast becomes stark when comparing specific numbers: while Japan maintains only about 80 political appointments in its entire civil service, the United States replaces approximately 4,000 high-ranking positions through political appointments during administrative transitions (Kobayashi, 2024). Such high degree of political influence in personnel matters has long distinguished the U.S. federal bureaucracy from its counterparts in other advanced democracies.

The extensive use of political appointments in the U.S. federal bureaucracy reflects a broader phenomenon that public administration scholars term “politicisation” - the practice of basing civil service personnel decisions on political criteria such as party relationships, personal connections, or ideological alignment rather than merit criteria (Peters & Pierre, 2004). The current reforms under the second Trump administration would significantly expand this already distinctive feature of American public administration.

The consequences of such politicisation have been extensively studied. A robust body of research, drawing from diverse national contexts including both developed and developing countries, demonstrates that increasing political control over bureaucracy tends to undermine, rather than enhance, government performance. Empirical studies around the world have found strong correlations between excessive politicisation and increased corruption, decreased organisational performance, and reduced operational efficiency (Cornell, 2014; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Lapuente & Suzuki, 2020; Lewis, 2011; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016). In fact, our recent systematic review of over 1,000 peer-reviewed papers provides compelling evidence that merit-based systems yield significantly better outcomes than politicised ones, including reduced corruption, improved efficiency, increased public trust, and enhanced civil servant motivation (Oliveira et al., 2024).

In light of these empirical findings, the current reforms warrant examination within a broader global context. Public administration scholars have increasingly focused on how populist politics affects bureaucratic capacity and civil service performance (Michael W. Bauer et al., 2021). This research has identified a pattern that Michael W Bauer (2024) terms “administrative backsliding” - the systematic weakening of bureaucratic institutions in countries experiencing democratic decline.

The consequences of such reforms are well-documented. Brazil’s experience shows how political appointees lacking adequate expertise decreased administrative efficiency (Story et al., 2023). In Hungary, politically motivated personnel decisions demoralised civil servants and led to a critical loss of organisational expertise (Hajnal & Boda, 2021). In Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments intensified antibureaucratic discourse, framing the bureaucracy as an extension of a privileged elite. This rhetoric reinforced the populist dichotomy between the “pure nation” and the “enemy of the nation”, positioning the AKP as the true representative of the people while portraying the bureaucracy as a “servant of a specific elite group” and, consequently, an “enemy of the people” (Yılmaz Uçar, 2025). Similar patterns emerged during Trump’s first term, where expert staff were often viewed as “political resistance forces”, leading to a devaluation of expert judgement and loss of organisational expertise as experienced staff resigned (Kucinskas & Zylan, 2023).

Radical bureaucratic reforms, as exemplified by the Trump administration, can be understood as both a response to problems within existing bureaucratic systems and a reflection of public distrust in bureaucracy. However, excessive politicisation of bureaucratic systems compromises administrative expertise and autonomy, risking a long-term decline in policy implementation capabilities and public service quality. Achieving better quality of government requires operating bureaucratic systems under appropriate political control without excessively weakening them, while leveraging their expertise. American public administration and practitioners should now make use of the experiences of countries that have faced administrative decline and draw on insights from comparative research on quality of government.

#### … while every NEG author will be a partisan hack.

J. Edward Kellough 25. Professor of public administration and policy at the University of Georgia, Ph.D. from Miami University. "The Fragility of Merit: Erosion of the Foundation of Public Service Under Trump." *Review of Public Personnel Administration*," 45(1), 20-21.

Discussion and Conclusion

Government employees implement policies and programs, issue rules and regulations, and ensure the operation of public agencies. Given these responsibilities, it is essential that the federal workforce be staffed with people who act on the basis of politically neutral competence. Employees’ decisions should be based on expertise. They should be loyal to the Constitution and federal statutory law rather than to any particular party or politician. Passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883 represented a decision by the United States to establish such a system—to develop a capable and professional public service selected on merit principles and protected from partisan abuse.

The fledgling merit system of 1883 was nurtured and sustained. Over the past 140 years, it grew to become the primary mechanism for filling jobs in the federal workforce. There was wide consensus that merit should be the foundation for public service. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the merit system is vulnerable to attack. The virtues of the structures erected to secure merit are many. Included among them are the promotion of competence in government and commitment to the rule of law (Aberbach & Rockman, 2023). But the merit system will not endure unless our consensus on its underlying principles is upheld, and we maintain a general agreement that we will abide by those principles.

Today, that agreement is threatened by a politicians and conservative policy and legal scholars dedicated to changes that will overturn core aspects of the merit system. Examples of their views are found in statements and policy papers from the Heritage Foundation (2017; Muhlhausen 2017a, 2017b) and in the writings of analysts such as Philip K. Howard (2017). James Sherk, of the Heritage Foundation and later the America First Policy Institute, is another forceful and articulate spokesperson for these views. Sherk served in the Trump Administration on the White House Domestic Policy Council and advocated in carefully argued essays for reforms to make the dismissal of federal workers easier and for the implementation of Schedule F (see, e.g., a statement on these positions in Sherk, 2021). Sherk was the architect of President Trump’s Executive orders of May 25, 2018, and of the President’s Executive Order establishing Schedule F (Sherk, 2022).

Reforms advocated by Sherk and others and implemented during the Trump years are examples the kinds of transformations that opponents of traditional concepts of merit wish to impose. Civil service policy changes advocated by the Trump Administration illustrate the vulnerability and fragility of merit in the U.S. government, and while President Biden’s reversal of the Trump policies was a victory for merit as we have known it, advocates for the kinds of reforms initiated under President Trump remain at work today. The threat to the merit system did not end with the Trump Presidency in January 2021. Former officials of the Trump Administration and Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives have argued recently that if Trump or another Republican wins the White House in 2024, they will push their plans for the civil service forward again (Swan, 2022a, 2022b; Wagner, 2022a, 2022b). In addition, if the Republicans gain control of the Senate in the fall of 2024, those advocating for change in the civil service will be in an even stronger position. Under these circumstances, there would be little that could be done to stop implementation of a new round of Trump-style reforms. In theory, Congress could pass legislation prohibiting certain kinds of actions. In fact, the House of Representatives passed a bill in September of 2022 (H.R. 302) to prohibit future versions of Schedule F (see, Wagner, 2022c), but in the Senate the bill required the support of at least ten Republicans to avoid the filibuster, and it died when the 117th Congress ended on January 3, 2023. Even if such a bill was passed and signed into law, however, given the enormous authority granted to the President by the Constitution, such legislation would likely not withstand judicial scrutiny. The federal merit system is vulnerable because of the way the U.S. Constitution structures authority over the civil service. That is, in all practical effect, a permanent vulnerability.

In an insightful article on the Trump Presidency and the federal bureaucracy, political scientist Bert Rockman (2019) notes that the neglect or downgrading of merit and efforts to elevate personal loyalty to the President during the Trump years were tools to delegitimize government, damage neutral competence, and facilitate an authoritarian conquest of the civil service (p. 26). As Rockman (2019) explains, a public bureaucracy with a measure of independence is essential for the rule of law (p. 14). The reforms initiated under President Trump, however, were oriented toward a different objective—political loyalty. Ultimately, the effectiveness of government was threatened, especially given the devaluing of administrative capability and expertise underlying the Trump agenda.

In the 1990s, the reinventing government movement and the concept of new public management rested in part on an assumption that you can deregulate public personnel management through dramatic reforms intended to increase “managerial flexibility” because politicians had fully accepted merit principles and recognized the importance of politically neutral competence in the public workforce. The rise of right-wing populism and the Trump Presidency proved this assumption wrong.19 Administrative reforms are usually grounded on political motives and, at the federal level, are almost always oriented toward augmenting Presidential control (Rockman, 2019). The federal merit system was initiated and developed to promote the growth of administrative expertise needed for effective government. Work should be undertaken to rebuild a national consensus in support of merit as the foundation of public service. A failure to do so will place the effectiveness and stability of government at risk.

#### Unions fund litigation, protect employees from firings, and lobby to check mission creep.

Nicholas Handler 24. Lecturer at Stanford Law School, J.D. from Yale Law School. "Separation of Powers by Contract: How Collective Bargaining Reshapes Presidential Power." *New York University Law Review*, 99(45), 77-80.

1. The Value of Unions

The civil service's move toward unionization reflects a broader recognition of the value of organized groups in protecting rights and pursuing key political objectives.160 Unions accumulate resources and expertise, allowing civil servants to mount sophisticated and well-financed defenses in labor disputes and to lobby effectively on key issues.161 Unions, for instance, are more effective at litigating employment disputes, a key tool in resisting the disciplinary efforts of management.162 They achieve higher win rates than unrepresented employees before arbitrators, a key strategic consideration for union-side counsel, as well as a key source of criticism from opponents of unionization rights.163 Unions also bolster the ability of civil servants to successfully litigate employment disputes against agencies in other ways. Through FLRA litigation, unions have secured civil servants Weingarten rights: the right to have a union representative present during a disciplinary investigation.164 Unions have likewise fought, with mixed success, to bargain for specific substantive rights for civil servants during interviews by agency inspectors general.165 Unions also provide extensive financial and logistical support to individual employees. The National Border Patrol Council, for instance, has established legal defense funds for CBP officers who are under investigation for their involvement in "critical incidents," such as the use of force.166

Even when unions do not litigate labor disputes directly, the threat of litigation - the possibility of losing, the need to delay policy implementation, the drain on budgets, and the attendant uncertainty - incentivizes agencies to cooperate with unions, and to take their preferences into account when staffing political positions and formulating policy. For instance, powerful unions, including those representing ICE and the EPA, can and do express their opposition to certain agency heads, dissuading the President from appointing them for fear of souring labor relations and inciting costly litigation battles.167

Perhaps the best example of labor's deterrent power is President Clinton's National Performance Review (NPR) program, launched in 1993. NPR's goal was to "reinvent[]" government by streamlining agency operations, reducing the size of the federal workforce, and reducing labor-management litigation.168 In exchange for union support for a variety of cost- and personnel-cutting measures, President Clinton granted unions substantial new powers.169 The National Partnership Council, which shaped agency reorganization policy, was given four union representatives (one from AFL-CIO, and one each from the largest federal unions - NTEU, AFGE, and NFFE).170 Further, in exchange for union cooperation, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12,871 requiring agencies to bargain over formerly optional subjects, effectively waiving a broad range of management rights and significantly expanding union bargaining power.171 Unions also took a substantial role in shaping the federal government's downsizing to ensure union positions received protection during workforce reduction.172

In addition to litigation, unions also have extensive statutory power to lobby Congress, often acting as one of the only sophisticated, proregulation advocacy groups in a competition of political influence dominated by private interests and well-funded nonprofit groups. The CSRA created unions that are, in effect, federally subsidized by dues, "official time" (time during which union officials are paid to engage in organizing and bargaining work), and protections against unfair labor practices.173 To facilitate union lobbying, Congress also created numerous exceptions to rules governing political engagement by civil servants, including the right to lobby on behalf of a labor organization and Hatch Act exemptions to participate in politics.174

Unionized federal employees have been politically engaged since the enactment of the CSRA, lobbying on a range of budgetary and regulatory reform issues.175 Unions lobby on issues ranging from regulatory enforcement policy, to the selection of agency leadership, to questions of funding - and their efforts have had substantial influence in Congress.176 Unions representing the employees of the NLRB, Department of Education, and IRS have all, for instance, lobbied for increases in appropriations for regulatory efforts that have been regular targets of under-funding.177 Labor also endorses political candidates, testifies routinely before Congress, and speaks to the press on high-visibility policy issues, often expressing views contrary to the views of agency leadership.178

#### The cumulative effect of collective bargaining is greater than the sum of its parts. Also, FLRA enforcement is effective.

Nicholas Handler 24. Lecturer at Stanford Law School, J.D. from Yale Law School. "Separation of Powers by Contract: How Collective Bargaining Reshapes Presidential Power." *New York University Law Review*, 99(45), 84-90.

III Bargaining as Bureaucratic Power in Contemporary Practice

Part II provided a typology of federal labor rights and examined how different rights can constrain presidential power. This Part provides data and real-world examples from three policy areas - immigration, tax, and environmental regulation - to show how these different forces can work in tandem to shape bureaucratic culture and affect policy outcomes throughout very different areas of federal law. These case studies are critical to understanding the true power of labor rights to reshape the executive branch. In isolation, the different contractual rights outlined above can hinder or redirect certain managerial initiatives. But when many of these contractual rights are deployed simultaneously, over years and decades, by sophisticated and well-organized unions, they can profoundly change an organization's culture, its institutional practices, and its mission.

These rights have been used differently in the different policy areas surveyed below. In immigration, labor rights have been increasingly weaponized by bureaucrats and their political allies to pursue certain ideological objectives. In the tax and environmental areas, they have been used more defensively, as a shield against structural deregulation. But each study demonstrates the role that labor can play in pushing back against presidential administration.

This Part consists of four subparts. Section III.A examines a novel dataset of 986 FLRA cases involving immigration, tax, and environmental regulation over the past 40 years. A central claim of this Article is that labor rights exert an important influence on the executive branch. The data confirms that hypothesis: Labor often prevails in contract disputes with agency management, including under hostile presidential administrations and hostile FLRA majorities. Many of these cases carry important implications for presidential control of specific agencies. The data also demonstrate that as labor is increasingly weaponized to contend with more aggressive versions of presidential administration, it is becoming more controversial. As measured by the number of dissents filed in FLRA cases and the rate of reversals of putatively neutral arbitration awards, labor litigation has become more divisive and harder fought over the last decade. Sections III.B, III.C, and III.D then provide case studies of how labor rights have reshaped bureaucratic-presidential relations and policy outcomes in immigration, tax, and environmental regulation.

A. Data

This Section presents an analysis of 986 FLRA adjudications spanning more than forty years, from 1979 to 2022, across seven agencies in three policy areas. Despite the importance of bargaining to modern bureaucracy, there exists very little empirical research on its implementation, including on fundamental questions such as how frequently labor and management prevail in labor disputes, how frequently litigations implicate particularly contested questions of managerial control, and how frequently disputes generate controversy. This Section seeks to fill that gap by providing a broad overview of how labor disputes play out over time across the immigration, tax, and environmental policy spaces. It first examines how frequently labor and management prevail in disputes to determine whether the CSRA serves its original purpose of promoting a relatively stable balance of power between the President and the bureaucracy. It then seeks to determine the degree to which labor disputes have generated controversy or become sites of legal or political contestation.

A caveat is necessary at the outset. The three-person FLRA is, in most instances, an appellate body. Most contractual disputes are resolved in the first instance by internal grievance processes or third-party arbitrators. Disputes over unfair labor practices are generally adjudicated first by administrative law judges.206 Disputes over bargaining unit recognition are heard first by FLRA Regional Directors; and negotiating impasses are typically resolved by the Federal Service Impasses Panel (FSIP).207 But the FLRA plays a formative role in setting federal labor policy, issuing authoritative constructions of the CSRA, and determining appeals from the hardest fought labor disputes. I therefore treat it as a reasonable proxy for which party the labor regime favors, and the controversy attending its decisions.

1. Wins and Losses

Key to understanding the effect of labor rights on bureaucratic relations is understanding which parties benefit from its provisions. Federal sector labor rights were designed to secure industrial peace within the executive branch. As described above, federal sector labor rights were the product of compromise between a presidency seeking greater freedom to structure the executive branch and a labor movement, supported by congressional Democrats, seeking more robust protections for federal employees. If they are serving that purpose, one would expect both labor and the President to prevail a meaningful percentage of the time. Guarantees of moderating power would be useless if one side gains a decisive or permanent advantage.

The data indicates that both labor and management do win a meaningful percentage of the time.208 As shown in Figures 1 and 2, this is true across presidential administrations, from 1979 to the present. It is true in periods of labor turmoil, such as the Reagan Administration, as well as times of relative rapprochement, such as the Clinton era.

As shown in Figures 3 and 4, while labor wins slightly more frequently when the FLRA has a Democratic majority (51.7% versus 48.0% during Republican majorities), the difference is relatively modest. Indeed, win rates for labor are much higher than for equivalent disputes before the MSPB, where surveys have consistently shown that agencies win over 75%, and perhaps as much as 90%, of the time.209 This data supports labor and Congress's assumption that unionized representation could serve as a more effective check on managerial authority than traditional civil service protections.

One other aspect of this data is worth noting. The total number of cases declined dramatically from the 1980s to 2020s. This is not a quirk of the specific agencies studied here. The total number of FLRA decisions has declined over the past four decades. From January 1, 1979 to December 31, 1989 the FLRA issued 4,196 opinions; from January 1, 1990 to December 31, 2000, it issued 3,147; from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2010, it issued 1,514; and from January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2020, it issued 1,176.210 The decline of the total number of FLRA cases does not mean that the federal labor regime has declined in importance. First, many disputes that were litigated in the CSRA's first decade are now settled informally through grievance procedures and labor-management programs such as those established under President Clinton's NPR program.211 These efforts reflect the bargaining power of federal workers. FLRA litigation is costly and disruptive. While there is no clear data on management council outcomes, anecdotes suggest that labor has a meaningful role in shaping management policy, and the councils are responsive to unions' concerns.212 Likewise, many disputes that might otherwise be litigated are instead now resolved through negotiated grievance procedures. Here again, anecdotal evidence suggest that these procedures can be more favorable to labor than the alternative.213

2. Controversy

The data also appear to show relative stability through the Trump Administration. This is significant, given President Trump's overt hostility to labor and the many ways in which his administration departed from traditional norms of labor relations.214 Observers have presumed that the FLRA majority appointed by President Trump was more hostile to labor than previous boards, including those with Republican-appointed majorities.215 Indeed, these accusations were so frequent that the FLRA's Chairman was questioned by the House Oversight and Reform Government Operations Subcommittee over her alleged "`anti-union' modus operandi."216 In terms of raw numbers on wins and losses, there is no clear indication of a strong anti-union bias. However, I reviewed additional metrics to examine whether there was any empirical support for the claim that the Trump-appointed FLRA was uniquely hostile to labor. Consistent with observations of labor hostility, and consistent with the general trend toward greater politicization of democratic institutions,217 these data do provide some indication that labor has become more politically divisive in the past decade.

#### 2. Necessary.

#### Bargaining uniquely defuses disputes AND improves morale.

Casey Keppler 24. Major in the United States Air Force, L.L.M. from the George Washingtom University Law School, J.D. from the University of Iowa College of Law. "The Propriety of Restraint: Assessing the Viability and Wisdom of Executive and Legislative Branch Action to Eliminate Collective Bargaining Rights in the Department of Defense." *Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal*, 41(297), 357-358.

C. The Benefits of Collective Bargaining Extend Beyond the Tangible Results Obtained Via Negotiation and Litigation.

An individual employee is significantly disadvantaged when attempting to seek relief from his or her employer.523 Collective bargaining gives employees a collective "voice" in an effort to level the playing field.524 A primary driver behind employees' efforts to organize and collectively bargain is, in fact, to gain a voice in the conduct of operations.525 Exercising their voice not only permits employees to improve their working conditions but also results in information sharing between employees and management that can produce a more effective and efficient working environment.526

The Supreme Court has acknowledged the important role that collective bargaining serves in providing an opportunity for employees to communicate information and suggestions that may be helpful to management.527 Unions can effectively gather information from their membership, bring concerns to management's attention, and provide clarification to their membership regarding rules or policies being proposed or implemented by management.528 There is significant evidence, in fact, that collective bargaining serves as an effective mechanism for employees and employers to work together, thereby giving employees a voice and boosting their performance and morale.529 Studies have shown that employee engagement with management is more productive when employee communications are channeled through an independent representative such as a labor union.530 Given the adversarial approach that naturally results due to the parties' commonly conflicting interests, the statutory requirement to bargain in good faith serves an invaluable purpose of securing a channel of communication.531 Removing that requirement increases the likelihood that open communication will cease and workplace disputes will linger without resolution.

Giving employees a voice in the conduct of operations reaps benefits beyond information sharing; it also positively impacts morale and productivity.532 Direct engagement that results in even small concessions from management can generate a sense of employee empowerment that has out-sized effects on morale.533 According to a report published by the World Bank, countries with higher unionization rates tend to exhibit higher productivity, and a sizable population of labor union members tends to have a stabilizing and beneficial effect on the national economy.534 Empirical evidence also shows a positive correlation between participation in collective bargaining and participation in societal democratic processes.535 Collective bargaining's positive impact on communication, morale, and productivity demonstrate that its importance extends beyond the tangible gains yielded by negotiation and litigation.

#### And provides a “collective identity” that strengthens governance.

Robert Bruno & Brandon Grant 16. Director of the Labor Education Program and Project for Middle Class Renewal, professor of Labor and Employment Relations in the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Ph.D. candidate in labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois. “The Relationship Between Unions and Meaningful Work: A Study of Public Sector Workers in Illinois.” IUIC School of Labor and Employment Relations. 10/14/2016. lep.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Public-Sector-Meaningful-Work-Report-FINAL.pdf#:~:text=union%20as%20a%20primary%20source,experience%20while%20on%20the%20job

This report, The Relationship Between Unions and Meaningful Work describes findings from a survey of a small group of Illinois public sector workers which investigates the work motivations of public employees. The study shows new evidence that government employees are strongly motivated to find “purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work.” Additionally, we find that government employees view their public sector union as a primary source of intrinsic motivation.

The unions that public sector workers belong to, do more than simply negotiate and enforce collective bargaining agreements. As our findings suggest, they are also related to the competence and performance level of public sector employees. But perhaps more provocatively, it is likely that the union plays an important role in the meaningful work that they experience while on the job, the job satisfaction they experience, and the prosocial values they maintain; some of the very factors that draw individuals into public service.

The policy implications for Illinois and other states are obvious. First, by taking away the right to unionize or denigrating the value of collective bargaining, as occurred in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan the state may be removing one of the most important incentives to recruit highly educated people to public service. Second, a weaker or nonexistent unionized government labor force may transform the choice of public service into merely a self-interested financial exchange; labor becomes just another commodity.

Finally and most potentially troubling, if workers are without a collective identity that potentially facilitates their quest for meaningful work and subsequently, they perceive their employment as primarily or solely as a way to earn living, then public service itself loses a significant portion of its service dimension. Ironically, weakening the institution that is unjustifiably characterized as imposing a financial burden on citizens may produce a workforce that labors for little more than a paycheck. Fair compensation should be a minimum requirement for government employees, but so should a commitment to preserving the people’s common assets.

Our study challenges the claim that public sector unions act contrary to the common good. We found evidence that not only do workers who choose to pursue careers in the public sector do so in spite of the comparative lower wages that they earn, but that the unions they belong to strongly related to their desire to accomplish more thorough work than earning an income. Work in the public sector serves as a vehicle to fulfill, at least in part, a personal need to experience a meaningful life and job.

#### The signal sent by collective bargaining rights is key.

Andrea Hsu 25. Journalist. "How Trump is decimating federal employee unions one step at a time." NPR. 8/31/2025. npr.org/2025/09/01/nx-s1-5515633/trump-federal-workers-labor-unions-va

Fears of a brain drain

Across the federal government, some workers aren't waiting around to see what happens. They're quitting now, having decided a government job just isn't worth it anymore. Many workers fear with unions gone, they won't have a say in matters such as telework or family leave policies that make a difference to their quality of life.

"Although they came to the federal government because of their passion for public service, they also came because of the flexibility of the government, and those flexibilities are just being wiped away," says Anthony Lee, a longtime Food and Drug Administration employee who's also president of NTEU Chapter 282, representing some 9,000 FDA employees across the Mid Atlantic.

Although the FDA has not yet terminated the union's contract, it has ordered the union to pack up its offices.

Lee says the government is losing chemists, toxicologists, engineers and others who ensure drugs and medical devices are safe and effective and food ingredients aren't poisonous.

"It is already, in my view, harming the public because we're losing that institutional knowledge. We're losing that subject matter expertise," Lee says. "As much as the current administration thinks that everyone is just quickly replaceable, they're not."

#### Uncertain processes fail.

EPI 25. Nonprofit think tank. "Trump administration attempts large-scale federal employee layoffs during government shutdown." Economic Policy Institute. 10-28-2025. epi.org/policywatch/trump-administration-attempts-large-scale-federal-employee-layoffs-during-government-shutdown

Prior to the government shutdown beginning in October 2025, the Trump administration had already pursued several avenues to attempt to dramatically slash the size of the federal workforce, including terminating or limiting collective bargaining agreements with federal employees unions, offering a deferred resignation package to all federal employees, closing agencies or offices whose mission does not align with the administration’s political agenda, wand proposing a new worker classification that would make it easier to for federal employees to be fired for political reasons. Most of these moves have been challenged in court by federal employee unions or other interested parties, and in some cases the government has been blocked from firing more employees while the litigation proceeds.

Impact: The Trump administration’s recent actions have added to the chaos and uncertainty experienced by many federal workers by months. At at least one agency where workers received layoff notices on October 10, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some were speedily rehired. Most others may now need to look to proceedings in the lawsuits brought on their behalf by federal employee unions to determine the ultimate fate of their jobs. These continued attacks on federal employees continue to undermine the public sector, weaken the effective operation of countless government programs and public service, and to harm the federal employees who may lose employment or be forced to seek out other jobs due to the uncertainty.

#### Rehiring can’t solve morale.

Sophie Gardner 25. Healthcare reporter. "Inside the CDC whiplash." Politico. 11-21-2025. politico.com/news/2025/11/21/inside-the-cdc-whiplash-00664632

Hundreds of workers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who were fired in October returned to work this week, thanks to a provision in the shutdown-ending deal passed by Congress.

For many, however, the trip back to the office is far from joyful.

Over the past nine months, under the supervision of Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., CDC employees have experienced more turmoil than most under the Trump administration.

They’ve faced several rounds of firings and sporadic reinstatements, witnessed the dramatic ousting of their director and the resignation of top career leaders in protest. Some were shot at by a gunman targeting the agency’s Atlanta headquarters in August and all have watched as Kennedy fired and then replaced a key panel of CDC vaccine advisers.

In addition to all that, like most federal workers, many CDC employees went without paychecks during the longest-ever closure of the federal government.

On Wednesday, as some employees returned to buildings riddled with bullet holes, morale took another hit with a surprise update to the CDC’s vaccines and autism webpage. It suggests that vaccines may cause autism and states that “studies supporting a link have been ignored by health authorities.” The move upended decades of work by senior career vaccine scientists to combat misinformation about a potential link between vaccines and autism – which many large studies have found no evidence of.

In a statement, HHS spokesperson Andrew Nixon described the change as a “common-sense update” to fulfill a “commitment to transparency and Gold Standard Science.”

He also said that Kennedy is trying to restore a “broken” CDC: “His focus is on returning the CDC to its core mission and ending the culture of insularity that has undermined public confidence.”

Some employees have a different take.

“On top of the never-ending feeling that we have metaphorical targets on our backs, a lot of employees feel like they have literal targets on their backs,” one CDC employee said. “The mood among CDC staff is ‘dead man walking.’”

The congressionally-mandated reinstatement of fired CDC workers marks at least the fourth time the administration has had to backtrack on planned firings of large chunks of the agency’s workforce.

POLITICO interviewed current and recently departed CDC employees about the changed work environment. Most of them were granted anonymity for fear of retribution.

Taken together, the eight workers described a culture of declining faith in the agency and a lack of guidance and communication from leadership. In his nearly three months on the job, CDC Acting Director Jim O’Neill has sent only one agency-wide email, two employees said, about how the agency should improve.

“Usually we have regular ‘all hands’ calls with the director. And the director takes time to meet the agency,” said a second CDC employee. “We’ve never heard the man even speak.”

Nixon said that O’Neill is having “almost daily meetings with CDC leadership” and has led the response to a recent infant formula recall.

In early October — just 10 days into the shutdown — the Trump administration laid off around 1,760 HHS employees, primarily hitting the CDC. It later reversed about half of those firings, citing “data discrepancies and processing errors.”

Democrats negotiated a provision in the continuing resolution that requires the CDC employees laid off during the shutdown and not initially reinstated — and the hundreds in the same situation at other agencies — be brought back. But CDC employees are skeptical that their reinstatements will stick.

“These people, especially those who received the reduction-in-force notices on Oct. 10, are wondering what happens Jan. 31,” the day after the continuing resolution expires, said Yolanda Jacobs, president of American Federation of Government Employees 2883 representing CDC workers in Atlanta.

“Are they going to be back [to] … being used as bargaining chips?,” Jacobs said. “When this administration makes threats, it does everything that it possibly can to make good on those threats.”

Max Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit that promotes government service, said those concerns are not baseless.

“Come Jan. 31 — the CR ends Jan. 30 — all bets are off,” Stier said. He added that other protections governing the firing of federal workers still apply.

The laid-off CDC staff who were not initially reinstated include employees on the Institutional Review Board, which evaluates research studies, the Technology Transfer Office, which deals with patents, and the Employee Assistance Program, which provides counseling and emotional support for the agency’s staff, former CDC Chief Medical Officer Debra Houry said on a call with reporters in October. Houry also noted that CDC employees who worked on a critical nutrition survey were not initially reinstated, as well as employees who worked on communications and policy.

The shutdown-ending deal means those employees are now being reinstated.

The agency has seen three large scale layoffs, in February, April and October — making it one of the hardest hit agencies during the Trump administration. In the days or weeks following each round, some employees have been told their firings were a mistake and asked to return.

“We know of people who have now received three RIF notices,” a third CDC employee said.

An agency in chaos

Despite the volatility, Amy Kirby had assumed her team — which had been working on a project to centralize CDC disease surveillance data from across the agency — was safe.

Kirby has been part of the leadership for the One CDC Data Platform effort since 2024, and the Trump administration had indicated it was a priority. O’Neill’s lone email to CDC staff after he assumed the acting director role in August pointed to the 1CDP project as an example of innovation, Kirby told POLITICO.

Kirby was shocked to learn that, on Oct. 10, the majority of employees working on the project – around 16 people — had received reduction-in-force notices.

Unlike many CDC employees that HHS has said were mistakenly fired, the 1CDP staff did not have their reduction-in-force notices rescinded the following day. HHS and CDC told Kirby’s bosses that the firings had been a mistake, she said, but “it was never reversed. It only got reversed when Congress put it in the bill.”

“It’s very odd that in a month, they couldn’t reverse what they were saying was a mistake,” Kirby said.

She believes the firings were purposeful. “Even if you’re working on an agency priority, they will still fire you.”

Kirby herself never received a reduction-in-force notice. But she decided to quit after most of her team was fired.

Her team is now returning, but they “don’t feel safe,” she said. “They are working under the assumption that in February they’re going to get RIFed again.”

“It is heartbreaking,” Kirby said. “I’m sad for the people that are still there having to struggle through all of that. I’m sad for our country that we don’t have CDC at its best.”

A fourth employee said they have struggled to plan for the future without a clear picture of what it will look like — and who will be left.

“We simply can’t do the kind of transformative long-term thinking that is needed for this work (or this administration) to be a success,” they said.

Several leadership positions have been left vacant, including chief medical officer. Houry resigned from that job in August, citing politicization of the agency.

The Office of Public Health Data, Surveillance, and Technology lost its director, Jennifer Layden, after she too resigned in August. Kirby’s division — which sits inside that office — also had lost some staff, and needed to restructure.

But because no one had been tapped as acting director of the office, “there was no one to approve those changes” and the plan had to be tabled, Kirby said. “Then the shutdown hit and the RIFs added other pressing issues to resolve.”

Layden’s position is still vacant.

‘Basically a hostile work environment’

In addition to logistical challenges, the volatility has also created an environment where employees often feel they can be ousted at any moment. And they’ve also lost a key layer of protection.

In August, HHS moved to stop recognizing several unions, including one that represents CDC workers at the agency’s Atlanta headquarters.

Nixon, addressing HHS’s decision to stop recognizing the unions, said President Trump implemented Executive Order 14251, which excluded many agencies from collective bargaining, “to remove unnecessary obstacles to mission-critical work and space previously used for union activities.”

As a result, said Jacobs, there is no one to de-escalate conflicts, and more employees than usual are facing disciplinary actions.

Jacobs said they’ve seen more employees placed on performance improvement plans or suspended.

“When the union is in the building, a lot of these disciplinary actions don’t have to escalate to that point, because a lot of times, a lot of those situations can be resolved at much lower level,” Jacobs said.

#### Protections against politicization are key.

Erin Schumaker 25. Health care reporter, covering the National Institutes of Health. "The ‘deep state’ is proving to Trump it’s a worthy foe." Politico. 9-14-2025. politico.com/news/2025/09/14/trump-federal-workers-deep-state-civil-service-00558940

But if Trump’s goal was to dismantle the workforce he calls the “deep state” — and blames for the failings of his first term — he’s got a long way to go. Although he’s disrupted swaths of the government, the vast majority of career federal employees who avoided the firings of the past seven months are sticking it out, according to Labor Department statistics and the White House’s own admission.

Many of those who’ve chosen to remain are keeping their heads down. Some aren’t — and their open defiance of Trump administration policies may make it harder for the administration to achieve Trump’s goals — much like Trump complained they did in his first term.

At the end of the day, career staffers still believe that politicians come and go and it’s them who will persevere, the survivors told POLITICO.

“They are staying in their jobs — the vast majority of people, even though they could get a job somewhere else or look for a job somewhere else,” said Rushab Sanghvi, general counsel for the American Federation of Government Employees, whose bargaining agreements at at least six agencies Trump has sought to scuttle. “There will be a new administration, with new priorities.”

For many, that’s true, but for others, such as those in highly specialized fields like foreign aid, the job market for former government workers is limited. The Bureau of Labor Statistics said Sept. 9 it likely overestimated past job growth by hundreds of thousands, painting a grimmer picture of the employment market than previously thought. That too could be a factor in federal workers’ apparent resolve to stay.

While 200,000 federal workers have left the government this year, the most in a single year since World War II, Trump still employs about 2.2 million civil servants.

By year’s end, the administration expects to cut loose 100,000 more federal workers, according to the White House Office of Personnel Management. That’s a lot, but it amounts to a cut of about 12 percent.

Some agencies have taken bigger hits. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., for one, says he expects the staff of the Department of Health and Human Services will shrink by a quarter. Others, such as the Department of Education and the EPA, have taken deep blows.

In terms of sheer numbers, the biggest hits have come at the Department of Defense, which has shed 56,000 workers out of about 900,000 civilians; the Department of Agriculture, down 22,000 from about 98,000, and HHS, which has 13,000 fewer people on the payroll compared to a year ago, when there were 93,000, according to a tally as of the end of August compiled by the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit group that opposes Trump’s downsizing.

But for all of Trump’s broadsides — he’s called civil servants “crooked” and “dishonest” people who are “destroying this country” — the percentage of federal workers quitting each month hasn’t budged, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. The quit rate is holding steady at 0.5 percent as of July, the same percentage as last year before Trump took office and down from 0.7 percent at the height of the pandemic.

A minority of federal workers back Trump and support what he’s doing. Thirty-eight percent of them voted for him last November, according to a Washington Post-Ipsos poll conducted in early March, and 83 percent of those who voted for Trump approved of his job performance, despite the turmoil in their workplaces that was well underway at the time.

The quit rate among federal workers is still far below the 2.2 percent rate of the private sector.

That’s despite the White House’s estimate that 80 percent of the departures were voluntary.

It’s not clear how many of those workers were planning to quit, or retire, anyway — and enjoyed a few extra months’ pay thanks to the “deferred resignation” deal Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency offered. The White House doesn’t have the data yet on the retirement eligibility of workers who took Musk’s “fork in the road” — or even hard numbers on how many did — but expects at least a third and as many as half had enough service to start collecting their pensions.

Rather than go quietly, workers who resent Trump’s attacks, as well as the damage they say the president has done to the programs they work on, intend to fight it out.

In response to Kennedy and Trump’s firing of the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Aug. 27, more than 1,000 civil servants, some current, some former, published an open letter demanding Kennedy’s resignation. CDC workers at agency headquarters in Atlanta held a “clap out” to thank three departing colleagues who’d quit in protest.

At the National Institutes of Health, workers have publicly accused Director Jay Bhattacharya of prioritizing politics over human safety, prompting him to meet with them. Bhattacharya promised to permit open debate and said he wouldn’t retaliate against them for speaking out.

In an interview with POLITICO, Trump’s personnel chief, former venture capitalist Scott Kupor said: “I don’t fault anybody for having views that are different from what the administration is doing.” Kupor added: “This is a completely different motion than anybody’s ever seen. So it’s not surprising to me at all that people are reacting to it.”

Agency leaders have, in other cases, punished workers who’ve resisted Trump’s moves. The Environmental Protection Agency fired employees who wrote a letter criticizing agency leadership and the Federal Emergency Management Agency suspended workers who warned in a letter that the Trump administration’s actions were preventing the agency from fully responding to extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods.

Those in the crosshairs say they’re leaning on the extensive system of protections Congress created to shield the civil service from political interference. “I’m grounded in what the rules are,” said a career senior executive at the Department of Health and Human Services, who was placed on administrative leave and offered a transfer to the Indian Health Service.