

The Outsiders: Examining the Effects of Political Appointments on Public-Sector Employee Engagement

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Scholars have long examined the inherent trade-offs between control and capability when presidents politicize the executive branch through their appointment powers, including through appointments. Research has consistently connected high ratios of appointees to career leaders with decreased agency performance and higher voluntary turnover at the career senior ranks. However, far less attention has been paid to the cumulative effect of such appointments on the engagement of the civil service workforce, a factor shown to influence organizational performance. Using the 2012 and 2016 Federal Employee Viewpoint Surveys, I evaluate the relationship between degree of agency politicization and self-reported measures of engagement among civil servants. Preliminary analysis indicates the use of political appointments by presidents can impede agency efforts to build and sustain an engaged workforce. The findings suggest the negative outcomes associated with these appointments are both broader and more enduring than the tenure of a single appointee, presenting a new perspective for scholarly understanding of the dynamics at play when presidents politicize the agencies they are entrusted to lead.

Keywords: politicization, employee engagement, public-sector, organizational performance

INTRODUCTION

As the head of the executive branch, a president's directives are often – and naturally – framed within a particular political context; indeed, both presidents and legislators have demonstrated an increasing willingness to politicize the federal bureaucracy to further their own ideologies or ends (Limbocker et al., 2022; Moynihan, 2022). However, scholars have long warned of trade-offs between control and capability when presidents politicize agencies, including exercising their appointment powers to fill leadership roles. While research consistently demonstrates that agencies with high numbers of appointees experience decreased performance and higher voluntary turnover at the career senior ranks, little scholarly attention has been paid to identifying the mechanisms that actually drive this relationship. An examination of how these “outsider” appointments influence civil servants' engagement and performance suggests that, in attempting to exert greater control, presidents may unintentionally inhibit agencies' ability to execute their policy agendas successfully.

While presidents and their administrations determine policy goals, enacting them falls to the 2.8 million Americans comprising the federal civil service (FRED, 2022). Balancing between providing the level of service the public expects/demands and pursuing presidential policy objectives within the constraints imposed by Congress (e.g., budgetary, regulatory), federal workers must navigate a veritable minefield of potential barriers and missteps. Large-scale public-service failures have contributed to declining respect for

civil servants and the work they do (Light, 2014). At the same time, application of deep subject-matter expertise is necessary to manage the increasing complexity of issues at the national level (Lewis, 2008; Dodds, 2022). These tensions are further strained by demographics: though traditionally lower than in the private sector, rates of annual retirements and voluntary turnover within the civil service have been increasing, resulting in capacity and experiential losses (Friedman, 2022).

Adding to this challenging landscape is the growing pressure exerted by political leaders on the civil service. Both presidents and legislators have demonstrated their increasing willingness to inject politics into the daily workings of federal agencies (Hult & Maranto, 2010; Waterman & Ouyang, 2020). A key component of politically motivated intercessions is a disregard – or even disrespect – for the knowledge and capabilities of public servants in executing policy directives (Kim et al., 2022). These interventions can be symbolic (e.g., President Reagan’s “nine scariest words” quip – RRP&L, 2021), indirect (e.g., holding up Senate confirmation hearings to force unrelated agency action – Dull et al., 2012), or direct (e.g., repeated characterizations of government control by the “deep state” – Pfiffner, 2022). Like all organizational leaders, political appointees’ words and actions influence how their workforces perceive their motives and judge the legitimacy of their authority. When their behavior is explicitly political, appointees can undermine the development of trust necessary for employees to become – or remain – engaged in their work, thereby leading to breakdowns in performance and organizational commitment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examining the relationship between the use of outside appointments and employee attitudes towards both their work and the organization more broadly draws on two main constructs: politicization and engagement. For both of these, scholarship offers multiple conceptualizations and approaches to measuring their influence in organizations. The following review of the pertinent literature will first outline engagement and its connection with organizational performance. Understanding the factors that promote or inhibit engagement will provide an appropriate lens through which to examine politicization and its established effects in public-sector organizations.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Employee Engagement

Throughout the past century, scholars have proposed, examined, debated, and revised various theoretical constructs to explain the behaviors of organizational members and the factors that influence them. Kahn (1990) is the first to propose “employee engagement” as a unique scholarly construct, identifying its three main characteristics as meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Kahn (1990) defines the distinct construct of engagement as primarily a psychological state, based on an *overall* relationship between an individual employee and organization. This organizational-level component of the engagement relationship distinguishes it from work/organization commitment, which is driven predominantly by an employee’s intrinsic values, and job satisfaction, which is specific to the role the employee currently fills within the organization (Rana et al., 2014; Agarwal, 2015). At its most basic, employee engagement is an “active, work-related positive psychological state” that results in the *voluntary* expenditure of an individual’s mental energy toward the achievement of organizational goals (Schuck et al., 2017, p. 954).

Scholars point to four main components of engagement: an individual’s inherent motivations and attitudes (Cooper et al., 2014; Vandenberg et al., 2014; Mussagulova, 2021); organizational factors (such as culture) (Alarcon et al., 2010; Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013); experiences related to the individual’s current role/job within the organization (including the relationship with their immediate supervisor) (Saks, 2006; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Shuck et al., 2011); and the behaviors of organizational leaders (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Asencio, 2016; Sharafizad et al., 2020). The importance of the last component is underscored in Zahari and Kaliannan’s (2022) systematic review of the engagement literature, in which they find that employee/follower perceptions of leadership capabilities are among the “most significant antecedents” of engagement among civil servants (p. 12).

Scholars repeatedly highlight the influence of organizational leaders in creating conditions conducive to engaging employees. This effect is most pronounced in fostering and sustaining trust in leadership to

have both the right capabilities *and* right motives to steer the organization. Trust in leaders – particularly in leader integrity – mediates the relationship between leadership and engagement during periods of organizational change by mitigating employee uncertainty or fear related to that change, including changes in leadership (Islam et al., 2021; Chakravarthy & Gargiulo, 1998; Kim & Moon, 2021; Bensemann et al., 2021). Perceived leader integrity plays a critical role in legitimizing authority by fostering trust between an employee and leaders. Hawdon (2008) suggests this integrity, which he defines as individual alignment with organizational norms, drives the development of influence that transcends position-based authority. Credibility of leadership capability is necessarily external – one must be *judged* credible by others to establish a valid claim to authority (Esfahani et al., 2014); therefore, perceptions of integrity by organizational members, especially subordinates, play a significant role in legitimating leadership (Suchman, 1995). Indeed, McManus and Mosca (2015) argue that “nothing destroys trust faster than hypocrisy from management” (p. 38). For most employees, their organizational leaders and managers *are* the organization; individual leader behaviors, writ large, demonstrate the organization’s values, norms, and expectations in ways a written mission statement and official policies cannot.

Trust in leadership boosts employee performance, empowerment, and organizational commitment, all of which are necessary for maintaining an engaged workforce (Wei et al., 2018; Porumbescu et al., 2013). In turn, engagement is an important contributor to organizational performance: a workforce that is predominantly engaged is more productive, experiences lower rates of voluntary turnover and absenteeism, and is more receptive to organizational change (Kim & Fernandez, 2017; Asencio, 2016; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In the public sector, scholars note declining levels of trust in government leaders and organizational effectiveness, suggesting that trust in senior leadership is a critical factor in both organizational outcomes and the individual emotional commitment necessary for engagement (Albrecht & Travaglione, 2003; Nollenberger, 2007; Nalbandian, 1989). While an individual employee’s propensity to trust is a “good starting point,” its existence does not absolve leaders of their responsibility to foster an environment conducive to leader-follower trust (Bernerth and Walker, 2009).

Drawing from the extant literature, a list emerges of leadership and management behaviors that positively influence employee engagement. These include transparent communication, acting with integrity (as defined by alignment with organizational values), the ability to articulate a clear vision, demonstration of a service orientation, and consistent provision of constructive feedback (Besieux et al., 2015; Popli & Rizvi, 2014; Top et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). What also emerges is an implied directive to organizational leaders who wish to foster or improve engagement among their workforces: to achieve engagement, put in place leaders and managers who demonstrate these behaviors. In the case of politically appointed leaders, however, these are generally not the factors considered when selecting candidates. While competency in managing bureaucratic institutions is important, loyalty to the president and his or her policy agenda is as important a consideration, if not more so, in making appointments (Waterman & Ouyang, 2020).

Recognizing and measuring levels of engagement, however, is complicated by the fact that the most visible evidence of it (e.g., increasing quit rates, decreased work output) can be attributed to a range of other factors and depends most heavily on self-reported indicators in surveys or interviews (Rana & Ardichvili, 2015). Shrotyria and Dhanda (2019) also note that assessing an organization’s level of engagement is complicated by the lack of consensus on how to define the term, leading to the development of measuring tools that disagree on which variables to include and that can differ in reliability and/or validity. These instruments conceive of engagement as the opposite of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli et al., 2002); as a reflection of an individual’s enthusiasm for the work itself (Harter et al., 2002), relationship with their immediate supervisor (Saks, 2006) or perceived job quality (James et al., 2011); or as the outcome of an employee’s intellectual connection to their workplace (Soane et al., 2012). The job engagement measure proposed by Rich et al (2010), which gauges the psychological safety and meaningfulness emphasized in Kahn’s (1990) original conception of engagement, differentiates between the attitudes that are more immediate (job fit and satisfaction, supervisor relationship) with an individual’s emotional connection with the entire organization through alignment with its values and belief in its commitment to their success. The most commonly cited measure in scholarly studies is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which

conceptualizes engagement as the opposite of burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2006). While the UWES is particularly useful in describing engagement in product/service-delivery focused organizations, its successful application to public-sector organizations requires customization to adjust for the absence of a profit motive (Wijesekera et al., 2020).

A common thread in the engagement literature is its conceptualization as representative of an employee's opinions, beliefs, and/or commitment to the organization more generally (Schaufeli, 2012; Agrawal, 2015). This whole-of-organization focus occurs concurrently – but separately – from feelings towards their current role, their inherent approach to work, and other influences in the immediate work environment (e.g., relationship with their supervisor, physical workspace, or team cohesion) (Perry, 1996; Coursey & Pandey, 2007; Rana et al., 2014). In measuring engagement, it is important to consider the professed attitudes and observable behaviors that previous scholarship has connected with this larger dynamic, including the expending of discretionary behavior on behalf of the organization (Schaufeli, 2012), expressed belief in its commitment to organizational justice (Strom et al., 2014), and buy-in with the organization's overall stated mission (Agrawal, 2015). Therefore, to capture an employee's level of engagement, instruments must probe deeper and more broadly than whether or not an employee enjoys their daily tasks, gets along with teammates, or feels supported by their immediate supervisor.

Politicization

Politicization, at its core, is “the injection of politics into otherwise neutral administration” (Wood & Lewis, 2017, p. 582). Under the U.S. form of democratic governance, the elected official is held accountable for policy successes and failures by the voting citizenry; it is this personal responsibility that impels the imposition of controls on the administrative agencies that carry out those policy mandates (Limbocker et al., 2022). Presidents are naturally political creatures; reaching the Oval Office requires assembling a broad network of supporters and operatives who align ideologically with them and commit to long-term support. Regardless of the specifics of each president's policy goals, they all work through the federal civil service to execute and enforce the resulting programs, regulations, and directives. Doing so effectively depends on the civil service possessing the necessary capabilities as well as sufficient (from a presidential perspective) loyalty to the president and/or their policy agenda. At the same time, some researchers cast serious doubt on the long-held belief that career civil servants perform their functions in a state of “neutral competence” that is inconsistent with empirical evidence that many bureaucrats employ political discretion in the course of their duties, thereby leading presidents to increase their politicization efforts (West, 2005).

Presidents have multiple methods at their disposal for exerting control over the administrative bureaucracy, including the issuance of executive orders, policy memoranda, and rules; influencing federal agency design; and appointments (Aberbach & Rockman, 1988; Dodds, 2022; Rogowski & Simko, 2022; Krause & O'Connell; Ouyang et al., 2017). By far, the most common form of politicization is the installation of preferred candidates into leadership positions throughout federal agencies (Lewis, 2008). Modern U.S. presidents have more than 4,000 such appointments at their disposal, only one-third of which require the U.S. Senate's “advice and consent,” thereby giving presidents wide latitude in installing leaders across and within agencies (U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, 2020). The majority of appointments, therefore, receive little to no public notice or scrutiny, allowing presidents significant latitude to reward loyalty and/or past (financial) support with appointed positions; the influences of these “invisible” appointments have received little scrutiny by scholars, who tend to focus on Senate-confirmed positions (Lewis & Waterman, 2013).

Several scholars observe that presidents must balance between competency and allegiance when selecting senior agency leaders, as potential appointees are generally stronger in one or the other, but not both (Waterman & Ouyang, 2020; Piper, 2022; Fuenzalida & Riccucci, 2018). Research connects agency politicization through appointments and increased voluntary turnover in the senior career ranks, leading to capacity and capability losses (Bolton et al., 2021; Dahlstrom & Holmgren, 2019; Enns-Jedenastik, 2014). The sheer number of required appointments, coupled with a fraught confirmation process and heightened political rancor, has resulted in increasing numbers of vacancies in federal leadership positions, driven both by the inability to fill a role as well as frequent turnover among appointees (Dull et al., 2012; Resh et al.,

2020; Wood & Marchbanks, 2008). In the literature, politicization is generally represented through a ratio of either (1) an agency's total appointments to total overall staff or – more commonly – (2) an agency's total appointments to number of SES positions or equivalents (Limbocker et al, 2022). It is important to note that recent scholarship questions whether these ratios adequately capture the construct, which may reflect the focus primarily on senior career staff behaviors and attitudes in studies of politicization (Limbocker et al, 2022).

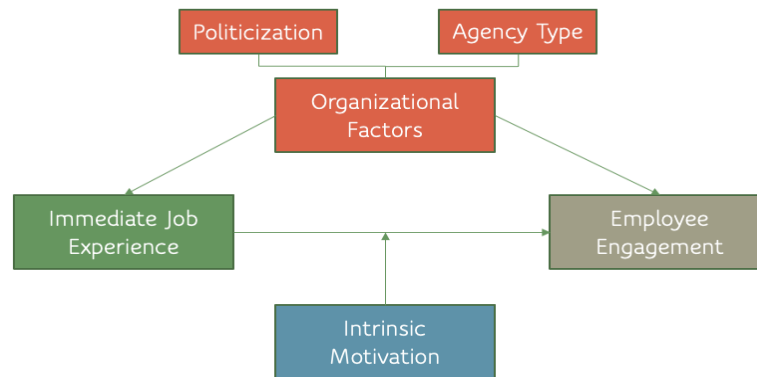
Some researchers have examined the effects of politicization on the federal workforce; however, the civil service, as a whole, has received minimal attention in regard to their attitudes or behaviors in response to politicization efforts (Bolton et al., 2021). Scholars have previously explored effects of various factors on civil service attitudes (e.g., turnover intention) and behaviors (e.g., voluntary separation); however, these studies tend concentrate on intrinsic factors (Edey Gamassou, 2014), organizational interventions (Cho & Lewis, 2012), or managerial activities (Lee & Jimenez, 2011; Kim & Fernandez, 2017). These relationships are important, as the successful execution of federal laws and policies (i.e., service delivery) relies on a productive, active civil service possessing positive attitudes towards their work and organizations, but study findings suggest there are additional, though less recognized, influences (Albrecht & Travaglione, 2003; Pfiffner et al., 2012).

It is reasonable to assume that the members of the non-senior career ranks also experience, to some degree, negative responses to politicization through appointments as their SES colleagues do, suggesting a potential – and under-investigated – explanation for performance declines. Regardless of sector, worker attitudes directly impact both performance and turnover intentions (Meier & Hicklin, 2008; Park, 2012; Selden & Brewer, 2000; Wushe & Senje, 2019; Zhang et al., 2014). Direct examinations of government employee turnover behaviors tend to focus on relationships between attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction or intrinsic motivation) and self-reported intentions to quit (Caillier, 2011; Cho & Lewis, 2012; Cooper et al., 2014). However, research confirms that, in general, civil service employees have much lower quit rates than comparable roles in the private sector (Ippolito, 1987; Feldman, 2005; Lee & Whitford, 2008; Pitts et al., 2011). Cho and Lewis (2012) observe that the reported rate of *intention* to quit among federal employees far outweighs the number who actually do so. More recently, a report on a survey of foreign service officers and specialists at the U.S. Department of State reveals that nearly a third (equating to over 4,000 officers and specialists) were “considering leaving...and actively looking for a new job” (Zuniga et al., 2021, p. 6; Nutter, 2020). However, data from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management does not show that those intentions resulted in actual increased voluntary separations (OPM, 2022). If public-sector employee attitudes are negatively influenced by political appointments yet those employees choose to remain in their roles, they risk becoming disengaged from their organization and their role within it. As a result, they may simply go through the motions of their jobs, thereby damaging their– and, by extension, their agency's – ability to achieve their public-service missions.

VARIABLES, DATA, AND METHODS

It is hypothesized that a higher degree of an agency's politicization, as experienced through political appointments, will result in lower scores on self-reported measures of engagement by employees of that agency. The main phenomenon of interest is how the *degree of politicization* of an employee's organization influences their attitudes towards that organization as represented by their self-reported *level of engagement*. However, an individual employee's attitudes towards their work are influenced by more than their overall relationship with their organization. Many studies examine the effects of an employee's immediate job experience: their fit with the job, the availability of resources, and relationships with their immediate supervisor or co-workers. Researchers also cite an employee's intrinsic level of motivation as a moderator for the relationship between their immediate job experience and level of engagement (Wright & Pandey, 2008). Finally, an additional organizational factor of *agency type* is included to account for the potential effect of variability in agency size, scope, or mission among respondents (See Figure 1). A multi-variate regression analysis is then performed on the resulting mathematical equation (See Figure 2).

**FIGURE 1
THEORETICAL MODEL**



**FIGURE 2
REGRESSION MODEL**

$$[EE] = \beta_0 + \beta_1[POL_RATIO] + \beta_2[JOB_ROLE] + \beta_3[MOTIV] + \beta_4[AGY_CAB] + \varepsilon$$

Variable	Description
EE	Self-reported level of engagement index
POL_RATIO	Level of politicization
JOB_ROLE	Immediate job environment index
MOTIV	Intrinsic motivation index
AGY_CAB	Agency type, cabinet or other (binary 1,0)

This study incorporates three sources of data, the first of which is derived from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). Administered annually by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to all federal employees since 2010 (bi-annually in 2006 and 2008), the FEVS probes employee opinions and attitudes regarding personal motivation, workplace relationships, job satisfaction, agency performance, and leader behaviors. Between 2011 and 2019, the FEVS posed the same questions, both in how phrased and the order in which they appear; this consistency has allowed researchers to evaluate responses aggregated to the agency level over time. While the FEVS has been rightly criticized as lacking sufficient evidence of a solid theoretical basis for the selection of topics and design of its questions, it maintains value as a data source given the consistency of response rates (both in total responses and percentage of participating agencies) and the inclusion of individual responses with demographic data that allows for more robust analysis (Fernandez et al., 2015).

In 2010, OPM began, as part of its annual reporting on FEVS responses, to calculate an Employee Engagement Index (EEI) comprised of responses to 15 questions in the FEVS clustered into in three “subfactors” under the headings of “Leaders Lead,” “Supervisors,” and “Intrinsic Work Experience” (OPM, 2016). However, the EEI as presented by OPM includes responses to questions that do not correspond with the engagement measures proposed or tested in the extant literature. With its whole-of-organization focus, engagement transcends an employee’s immediate circumstances (role, team cohesion, supervisor support) and their own intrinsic motivation. In addition, the FEVS contains questions that point to engagement markers that OPM does not include in its EEI. For these reasons, this study used new indices based upon the average of each respondent’s rating of selected FEVS questions indicating markers of engagement (Table 1), intrinsic motivation (Table 2), and immediate job environment (Table 3).

TABLE 1
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INDEX

FEVS#	Question	Reference(s)
3	I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.	Wijesekera et al (2020)
4	My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.	Schaufeli et al (2006)
12	I know how my work relates to the agency's goals and priorities.	Wijesekera et al (2020)
13	The work I do is important.	Schaufeli et al (2006)
39	My agency is successful at accomplishing its mission.	Saks (2006)
40	I recommend my organization as a good place to work.	Saks (2006)
41	I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.	Saks (2006)
53	In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.	Saks (2006)
54	My organization's senior leaders maintain high standards of honesty and integrity.	Carasco-Saul et al (2015); Kim & Moon (2021)
58	Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, needed resources).	Carasco-Saul et al (2015); Kim & Moon (2021)

TABLE 2
INTRINSIC MOTIVATION INDEX

FEVS#	Question	Reference(s)
1	I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.	Perry (1996); Coursey & Pandey (2007)
5	I like the kind of work I do.	Perry (1996); Coursey & Pandey (2007)
11	My talents are used well in the workplace.	Perry (1996); Coursey & Pandey (2007)
63	How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?	Perry (1996); Coursey & Pandey (2007)
65	How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?	Perry (1996); Coursey & Pandey (2007)
67	How satisfied are you with your opportunity to get a better job in your organization?	Perry (1996); Coursey & Pandey (2007)

TABLE 3
IMMEDIATE JOB ENVIRONMENT INDEX

FEVS#	Question	Reference(s)
2	I have enough information to do my job well.	Rana et al (2014); Saks (2006)
6	I know what is expected of me on the job.	Rana et al (2014); Saks (2006)
9	I have sufficient resources (for example, people, materials, budget) to get my job done.	Rana et al (2014); Saks (2006)
10	My workload is reasonable.	Rana et al (2014); Saks (2006)
15	My performance appraisal is a fair reflection of my performance.	Rana et al (2014)
20	The people I work with cooperate to get the job done.	Rich et al (2010)
21	My work unit is able to recruit people with the right skills.	Rich et al (2010)
26	Employees in my work unit share job knowledge with each other.	Rich et al (2010)
42	My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues.	Saks (2006)
43	My supervisor provides me with opportunities to demonstrate my leadership skills.	Saks (2006)
44	Discussions with my supervisor about my performance are worthwhile.	Saks (2006)
46	My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance.	Saks (2006)
48	My supervisor listens to what I have to say.	Saks (2006)
49	My supervisor treats me with respect.	Saks (2006)
51	I have trust and confidence in my supervisor.	Saks (2006)
52	Overall, how good a job does you feel is being done by your immediate supervisor?	Saks (2006)
69	Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?	Rana et al (2014); Rich et al (2010)

Responses to the selected FEVS questions comprising the three indices are scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with the exception of question 52, which asks the employee to rate their immediate supervisor’s overall performance from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). An average for each index by respondent was calculated for the years 2012 and 2016, with summary statistics listed in Tables 4a and 4b. These two years were selected from the available FEVS data as they correspond to the publication of the official list of presidential appointments. Issued in December of each presidential election year by the U.S. House of Representatives, the report, officially titled *United States Governing and Policy Positions*, is commonly referred to as the “Plum Book” and details appointment positions by agency, type, and current incumbency (or vacancy, as appropriate) (Plum Book, 2020).

TABLE 4A
SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR ENGAGEMENT, IMMEDIATE JOB ENVIRONMENT, AND
INTRINSIC MOTIVATION, 2012

<i>AVG_EE</i>		<i>JOB_ROLE</i>		<i>MOTIV</i>	
Mean	3.66471	Mean	3.68945	Mean	3.48020
Standard Error	0.00096	Standard Error	0.00095	Standard Error	0.00106
Median	3.77778	Median	3.78947	Median	3.66667
Mode	4.00000	Mode	4.00000	Mode	4.00000
Standard Deviation	0.78837	Standard Deviation	0.77762	Standard Deviation	0.87566
Sample Variance	0.62152	Sample Variance	0.60470	Sample Variance	0.76678
Kurtosis	0.10125	Kurtosis	0.26859	Kurtosis	-0.34389
Skewness	-0.56400	Skewness	-0.69548	Skewness	-0.40914
Range	4.00000	Range	4.00000	Range	4.00000
Minimum	1.00000	Minimum	1.00000	Minimum	1.00000
Maximum	5.00000	Maximum	5.00000	Maximum	5.00000
Sum	2479642.95	Sum	2496383.24	Sum	2354797.4
Count	676628.00	Count	676628.00	Count	676628.00

TABLE 4B
SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR ENGAGEMENT, IMMEDIATE JOB ENVIRONMENT, AND
INTRINSIC MOTIVATION, 2016

<i>AVG_EE</i>		<i>JOB_ROLE</i>		<i>MOTIV</i>	
Mean	3.64276	Mean	3.74804	Mean	3.49154
Standard Error	0.00134	Standard Error	0.00129	Standard Error	0.00146
Median	3.77778	Median	3.88889	Median	3.66667
Mode	4.00000	Mode	4.00000	Mode	4.00000
Standard Deviation	0.84438	Standard Deviation	0.80971	Standard Deviation	0.91749
Sample Variance	0.71297	Sample Variance	0.65563	Sample Variance	0.84180
Kurtosis	-0.00463	Kurtosis	0.35039	Kurtosis	-0.39437
Skewness	-0.57353	Skewness	-0.78789	Skewness	-0.42028
Range	4.00000	Range	4.00000	Range	4.00000
Minimum	1.00000	Minimum	1.00000	Minimum	1.00000
Maximum	5.00000	Maximum	5.00000	Maximum	5.00000
Sum	1437335.72	Sum	1478874.19	Sum	1377666.00
Count	394573.00	Count	394573.00	Count	394573.00

Plum Book data is integral to calculating an agency's level of politicization during a specific period as a ratio of appointees to the agency's total of senior-level, career employees (Limbocker et al, 2022). To construct this variable, the number of each agency's appointments was extracted from the Plum Book and then divided career senior executive service (SES) and equivalent positions obtained from OPM's raw data sets for 2012 and 2016; the summary statistics for politicization are listed in Table 5. Finally, OPM

categorizes federal agencies as either cabinet-level or independent; agency category is included in the analysis as a binary variable (1,0).

TABLE 5
SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR POLITICIZATION SCORE, 2012 AND 2016

<i>2012 Ratio</i>		<i>2016 Ratio</i>	
Mean	0.20632	Mean	0.19586
Standard Error	0.03695	Standard Error	0.03197
Median	0.12059	Median	0.13177
Mode	0.00000	Mode	0.00000
Standard Deviation	0.23074	Standard Deviation	0.19963
Sample Variance	0.05324	Sample Variance	0.03985
Kurtosis	1.65280	Kurtosis	1.72326
Skewness	1.64203	Skewness	1.55391
Range	0.85736	Range	0.77063
Minimum	0.00000	Minimum	0.00000
Maximum	0.85736	Maximum	0.77063
Sum	8.04647	Sum	7.63867
Count	39	Count	39.00000

RESULTS

A multi-variate linear regression was run on the dependent variable of *engagement* (AVG_EE) with the independent variables of politicization ratio (POL_RATIO), immediate job experience (AVG_JOB), intrinsic motivation (AVG_MOT), and agency category (AGY_CAB), with the summary outputs listed in Tables 6a and 6b. The expected negative relationship between politicization and engagement is supported in 2012 but not in 2016. In both years, however, the observed effect is quite small (-0.044 and 0.035, respectively) though statistically significant. This is not the case with the independent variables of intrinsic motivation and immediate job experience, both of which demonstrate a positive relationship with engagement in each year. Interestingly, intrinsic motivation demonstrates the largest effect of all the variables, increasing from 0.51 in 2012 to 0.59 in 2016. The regression also reveals a statistically significant negative effect for employees of cabinet agencies in both 2012 and 2016.

Regression Equation, 2012

$$[EE] = 0.68 + (-0.04[POL_RATIO]) + 0.34[JOB_ROLE] + 0.51[MOTIV] + (0.07[AGY_CAB]) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Regression Equation, 2016

$$[EE] = 0.61 + 0.04[POL_RATIO] + 0.27[JOB_ROLE] + 0.59[MOTIV] + (-0.05[AGY_CAB]) + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

**TABLE 6A
SUMMARY REGRESSION OUTPUT, 2012**

SUMMARY OUTPUT

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.8714163
R Square	0.7593664
Adjusted R Square	0.759365
Standard Error	0.3867292
Observations	676628

ANOVA

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	4	319341.82	79835.455	533804.19	0
Residual	676623	101195.36	0.1495594		
Total	676627	420537.18			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	0.67681	0.0026462	255.77084	0	0.6716237	0.6819964	0.6716237	0.6819964
POL_RATIO	-0.0441892	0.0020902	-21.141616	3.55E-99	-0.0482858	-0.0400926	-0.0482858	-0.0400926
JOB_ROLE	0.3435351	0.0010555	325.45777	0	0.3414662	0.3456039	0.3414662	0.3456039
MOTIV	0.5134851	0.0009369	548.06167	0	0.5116488	0.5153215	0.5116488	0.5153215
AGY_CAB	-0.0650721	0.0014074	-46.236988	0	-0.0678305	-0.0623137	-0.0678305	-0.0623137

**TABLE 6B
SUMMARY REGRESSION OUTPUT, 2016**

SUMMARY OUTPUT

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.8673417
R Square	0.7522816
Adjusted R Square	0.7522791
Standard Error	0.4202588
Observations	394573

ANOVA

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	4	211630.25	52907.563	299560.14	0
Residual	394568	69687.613	0.1766175		
Total	394572	281317.87			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	0.6104803	0.003652	167.16493	0	0.6033226	0.617638	0.6033226	0.617638
POL_RATIO	0.0352814	0.0026666	13.230822	5.94E-40	0.0300549	0.0405078	0.0300549	0.0405078
AVG_JOB	0.2727613	0.0014684	185.7524	0	0.2698833	0.2756393	0.2698833	0.2756393
AVG_MOT	0.5859151	0.0012968	451.82249	0	0.5833734	0.5884567	0.5833734	0.5884567
AGY_CAB	-0.0531096	0.0018947	-28.030432	1.02E-172	-0.0568232	-0.049396	-0.0568232	-0.049396

The regression outputs indicate that engagement, as a reflection of an employee's overall relationship with their organization, has multiple components. The R-squared values for both 2012 and 2016 are quite

similar and relatively high (0.759 and 0.752, respectively), demonstrating a strong correlation and suggesting that the model is a good fit for explaining the proposed effects. The consistency in the R-squared values, particularly in light of a large variance in number of responses between the two periods (676,628 in 2012 vs. 394,573 in 2016), suggest that the model's components merit consideration in understanding overall engagement – and this includes the effects of presidential action to politicize agencies.

The choice to utilize FEVS response data for this study limits some of the depth of analysis. While surveys in general can offer many advantages for researchers, they require careful, informed development to ensure effect and valid capture of the constructs or variables of interest. Capturing attitudes through surveys is further challenged by human nature, which may lead respondents to be reluctant or unable to provide accurate answers. The analysis is also limited by the previously noted concerns over how politicization is measured, especially considering that the most common approach ignores the attitudes of the very population of interest in this study. These limitations are covered in more detail in the conclusions section.

CONCLUSIONS

The effects observed for calculated politicization ratio are statistically significant, supporting the proposition that politicization of agencies influences employee engagement. However, the contribution of politicization to the regression equation is both inconsistent (negative in 2012 and positive in 2016) and quite small (-0.044 and 0.035, respectively). One potential reason for this is the large drop in the number of responses between 2012 (n=676,627) and 2016 (n=394,573), which may contribute to some of the variance in effects between the two surveys: perhaps those employees who were most negatively influenced by politicization were absent in 2016 (i.e., separated from federal service) or chose not to participate that year. While OPM includes some demographic information for each respondent (e.g., agency, position type, age), the categories included vary from year to year, limiting the ability to analyze agency-wide features, such as changes in composition, that could be contributing to shifts in FEVS responses.

Another potential explanation for the split effects may be connected with another of the included variables. The regression revealed a statistically significant negative effect for employees of cabinet agencies in both periods examined. As cabinet-level agencies are tied the most closely to a president's policy agenda (and, therefore, likely subject to closer scrutiny by that president), this suggests a different facet of politicization may be negatively influencing agency member attitudes. If this is the case, the use of a simple ratio of appointments to career SES positions fails to capture an accurate measure of the politicization construct: indeed, there have been calls by scholars in recent years to re-evaluate how politicization is both defined and quantified (Limbocker et al, 2022). As has been argued in this paper, scholarly examinations of politicization and, specifically, outside political appointments have largely overlooked their effects on the civil service as a whole, with the appointments-to-career positions ratio a prime example of this narrow perspective. However, combining the results of this study with Wood and Lewis' (2017) characterization of politicization as “the injection of politics into otherwise neutral administration,” the choice to measure the construct without considering its influence on *all* members of the federal workforce becomes much harder to justify.

The data sources themselves may also help explain the divergent outcomes. The regression outputs indicate that engagement, as a reflection of an employee's *overall* relationship with their organization, has multiple components. The R-squared values for both 2012 and 2016 are quite similar and relatively high (0.759 and 0.752, respectively), demonstrating a strong correlation and suggesting that the model is a good fit for explaining the proposed effects. However, as previously noted, engagement occurs alongside similar attitudes, such as job satisfaction, morale, and perceptions of job-role fit; it is possible some of the questions, as phrased and ordered by OPM in the annual FEVS survey, do not differentiate sufficiently between these concepts, thereby muddying the results. This is a particular risk when the dependent variable and one or more independent variables (unknowingly) represent the same value and can result in an inflated R-squared value (Frost, 2020). OPM does not make public the theoretical foundations for how it constructs the FEVS survey, nor does it provide any evidence of instrument validity; therefore, observed relationships derived

from FEVS survey responses must be interpreted with a certain level of caution. That said, the consistency in the R-squared values, particularly in light of the large variance in number of responses between the two periods, suggest that the model's components merit consideration in understanding overall engagement – and this includes the effects of presidential action to politicize agencies.

The model, though it demonstrates good fit, does not explain all of influences on engagement, including other factors that the calculated indices may not capture adequately. The literature on engagement exists alongside various related constructs of workplace attitudes, including those that describe whole-of-organization relationships, such as organizational commitment and trust (Top et al, 2012; Esfahani et al, 2014). It is unclear from the literature if survey questions can adequately measure latent attitudes such as these, suggesting that future explorations of these connections would benefit from a more qualitative approach. Another unique aspect of federal work is the real possibility of major swings in policy focus every four to eight years as administrations change. Depending on an employee's particular role, these shifts may profoundly impact their work, including the level of management support and access to resources they experience, thereby suggesting a factor that can influence attitudes at both the organization and immediate job levels.

The results of this study demonstrate clearly that employee engagement, indicating a worker's overall relationship with their agency, is influenced by multiple factors. While some of these are well established, such as intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction, organizational elements also contribute to workplace attitudes. Critically, the impact of these institutional or structural features can be difficult to identify as their most visible outcomes – turnover and performance declines – can also result from other factors that may or may not be related to engagement (Bolton et al., 2021; Pitts et al., 2014; Meier & Hicklin, 2008). The noted limitations of FEVS-derived responses notwithstanding, this study highlights that many of the factors that influence employee engagement – and, therefore, employee performance – are potentially subject to control or mitigation by organizational leaders.

Today's civil servants work within a complex and challenging environment to deliver critical services to fellow citizens and safeguard the institutions of government. When presidents politicize that environment through outside appointments, they often trade agency performance for increased loyalty to themselves and their policy agendas through mechanisms that are not well understood. By considering the effect of presidential reliance on outside leadership on civil servants' work-focused attitudes, this study identifies a potential contributing factor to agency outcomes. Importantly, it suggests that research focusing solely on appointee effectiveness or senior civil servant responses to politicization overlooks an important component of policy execution: the men and women who actually implement it. This negative relationship between political appointments and engagement is not captured in prior studies of politicization, supporting calls by scholars to revise how the construct is characterized and. While decisions to politicize lie with the president and their administration, federal agencies are not powerless to mitigate some of its unintended consequences on employee attitudes. Recognizing the existence of organization-level factors and understanding how they can influence those workplace attitudes are critical to managing their effects.

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