

Is the Failed Pandemic Response a Symptom of a Diseased Administrative State?

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The U.S. national government's poor pandemic response raises unsettling questions about the overall health of the administrative state: that is, the agencies, people, and processes of the executive branch of the federal government. First, are the administrative weaknesses revealed over the last year symptomatic of widespread problems beyond the public health bureaucracy? Second, are the weaknesses attributable to the Trump administration or do they reveal a deeper malady, something that afflicted earlier Democratic and Republican administrations? In summer 2020, my colleagues and I conducted a survey of thousands of federal executives to help shed light on these questions. These executives reported a low opinion of the then-current administration, the White House, and the president's political appointees. Yet they also reported long-standing issues of low investment and problems of capacity that extend back into other Democratic and Republican administrations. Years of neglect have culminated in vulnerabilities manifesting themselves in increasingly regular and severe administrative failures. These failures put all of us at risk.

In the summer of 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States surged past six million and deaths approached two hundred thousand souls. Incalculable human suffering directly related to the virus was compounded by secondary effects of the pandemic on the nation's economy and its social fabric: its schools and volunteer activities, its houses of worship and gatherings of family and friends. Cases and mortality were on the rise again, particularly in the Sunbelt and Midwest. Unhappy citizens complained about delays in testing and lengthy shutdowns. Faced with the largest public health emergency in decades, the United States seemed to lack the capacity to respond. While other countries were celebrating a reprieve, if not recovery, the United States showcased an unsettling breakdown.¹ The nation initially ran short on ventilators.² Shortages in personal protective equipment persisted for months.³ The federal government could provide neither sufficient nor timely tests.⁴ A high school student in Seattle was collecting and distributing data on COVID-19 infections more reliably than

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the ten-thousand-person federal agency responsible for the job.⁵ Not only was the administration incapable or unwilling to provide a unified plan for how to respond to the crisis, it cast doubt over whether there was a crisis.⁶

Those commenting on the crisis gave different explanations for the nation's pitiful pandemic response. Some blamed poor presidential leadership.⁷ The president's critics charged him with missing clear warning signs, refusing to use in-house government expertise and plans, and undercutting efforts to curtail the virus's spread. At the end of February, 2020, the president stated, "It's going to disappear. One day, it's like a miracle, it will disappear."⁸ The president persistently downplayed the threat and proposed "liberating" states like Michigan from what he described as illegitimate stay-at-home orders.⁹ He publicly contradicted CDC statements on the severity of the crisis and on appropriate preventative measures like masks and prohibitions on large gatherings. Such actions left governors and mayors with little political cover for tough choices and encouraged resistance to public health actions that would slow the spread of the virus.

For all the criticism of the president, other analysts puzzled over the poor performance by the bureaucracy responsible for the pandemic response. At the heart of complaints about poor bureaucratic performance was the CDC. The president himself criticized the agency for being ill-prepared for the crisis, tweeting, "For decades the @CDCgov looked at, and studied, its testing system, but did nothing about it. It would always be inadequate and slow for a large scale pandemic."¹⁰ *The New York Times* publicly wondered "What Went Wrong?" in the agency whose entire purpose is to combat infectious diseases like COVID-19.¹¹ A deep dive into the public health bureaucracy revealed organizational chaos and resource problems.¹² Why could it not perform basic tasks like delivering reliable tests, collecting data, or even conveying a consistent message?

Both explanations for the breakdown can be true. The president's choices in the moment prevented an effective national response, while his earlier decision to neglect governance had borne bitter fruit in a demoralized and ultimately broken public health bureaucracy. Critics charged Trump with malign neglect or a purposeful effort to hamstring the administrative state by breaking the bureaucracy.¹³ Debates about pandemic response raise more general questions about the overall health of the administrative state: that is, the agencies, people, and processes of the executive branch of the federal government. Do the symptoms manifesting in the public health bureaucracy extend to other parts of the bureaucracy? And are the symptoms attributable to the actions of the Trump administration or do they reveal a deeper malady, something that afflicted earlier Democratic and Republican administrations?

Careful observers inside and outside of government had been raising alarm about the health of the administrative arm of the government well before the

Trump presidency.¹⁴ Since at least the New Deal, the expansion of government activity has been the subject of strong political disagreement between the parties. The administrative state has been caught in a partisan struggle over the proper scope of government activity, a debate that has only sharpened since the early 1980s with the increased polarization of the two main political parties. Conflating the departments and agencies of government with the policies they pursue, many Republican elected officials have sought to limit government activity by unraveling the machinery of government. Moreover, both parties have responded favorably to management fads that feed into negative stereotypes about bureaucracy and have responded accordingly.¹⁵ For neither party is effective agency management – the hard work of government that no one sees – a regular priority.¹⁶

Debates about the response to the coronavirus pandemic raise the larger question of the robustness of the administrative state in the United States. Government workers keep people safe, provide security and infrastructure for the U.S. financial system, enforce laws, and deliver mail. Their health and readiness are not trifling concerns. If these agencies fail, veterans may die waiting for health care. Poor kids may go hungry. Criminals may go unchecked and people may not be able to vote or get prescriptions on time. Government agencies helped rebuild Europe, win the Cold War, and send astronauts into space. Federal employees invented the Internet.¹⁷ One-quarter of U.S. Nobel Prize winners are federal employees.¹⁸ Partisans can reasonably disagree about what the federal government should do, but it is everyone's job to make sure it is healthy and managed well.

In summer 2020, my colleagues Nolan McCarty, Mark Richardson, and I joined forces with the Partnership for Public Service to survey thousands of appointed and career federal executives to get their perceptions about the health of the administrative state. We asked these individuals about their perceptions of the federal workforce, investments in the public sector, and management.¹⁹ We have asked some of these questions in the past, which provides some historical reference.²⁰ This time, to provide a public-private sector comparison, we also included some questions that survey researchers ask C-suite private sector executives.²¹ The Partnership released the preliminary results in October 2020.²²

A survey cannot tell us everything we need to know about the capacity of the U.S. administrative state, but these results provide important insight into what is happening inside government agencies. Respondents provided both quantitative and qualitative data that help illuminate current conditions. For example, one respondent wrote, "Thank you so much for doing this. It is vital that the data get used to really rebuild the federal government after how much this administration and its enablers have built on decades of efforts to undermine and destroy the effectiveness of government." Another wrote, "Thank you for doing this survey. It is very important work. I've been concerned about a crumbling infrastructure from within for a long time now." Some respondents were more pointed in their

critique of the current administration (“I am concerned with the Trump Administration’s attempts to politicize the civil service”) or of the civil service (“[My agency] is replete with dedicated socialists. The agency should be reformed to create greater balance between political views”).

We fielded the survey during the extraordinary circumstances of a worldwide pandemic and unusual political contestation, and the answers reflect that. Notably, more than 59 percent of our federal executives reported that their work portfolio changed during the pandemic.²³ For some, the pandemic had a large effect on their work. While 79 percent reported that their agency “has a sense of urgency for getting things done,” fully 41 percent reported that the services their agency provides to the public have suffered during the pandemic. Yet respondents generally reported that the federal government is a good employer in the crisis and 80 percent reported having all the necessary information technology to work effectively from home.

For others, the unusual political environment of their work provided important context for their responses. Some asked explicitly that we take extra care to ensure confidentiality of their responses. Others admitted, “I even hesitate to put this in writing for fear of retaliation.” By contrast, other respondents inferred bias in the survey, complaining, “The very fact that you are choosing to ask these questions only now under the Trump Administration demonstrates again clearly . . . how biased is academia and the media. You are blinded by your ideology.” Relative to earlier surveys, the rawness of the comments, the despair, and the anger is striking. For many, there is an intense pride in their agency and what they do. This animates either a frustration with changes or a defensiveness in assessing agency performance.

The questions on the survey run the gamut from management to politics, from shutdowns to the pandemic. I focus here on questions targeted at assessing the health of the federal workforce and the quality of management. Overall, federal executives reported high levels of satisfaction with their work. They reported some flexibility to innovate, and many reported an environment of trust and the use of data and evidence in their agencies. Others reported problems with trust, declining attention to facts and data, and little investment in future administrative capacity. A large and quickly growing proportion of federal executives reported significant problems in their workforces, putting in danger their ability to implement core tasks. These workforce problems stem from resource problems and lower levels of competence in all types of federal employees.

Among the most important questions in the survey were those about the health of the federal workforce. The responses we received are illuminating, at times reassuring and at others quite concerning. Federal executives reported high levels of satisfaction with their work and their agencies as places to work, particularly during a pandemic. However, they expressed increasing alarm about the capacity of the workforce to carry out core agency missions.

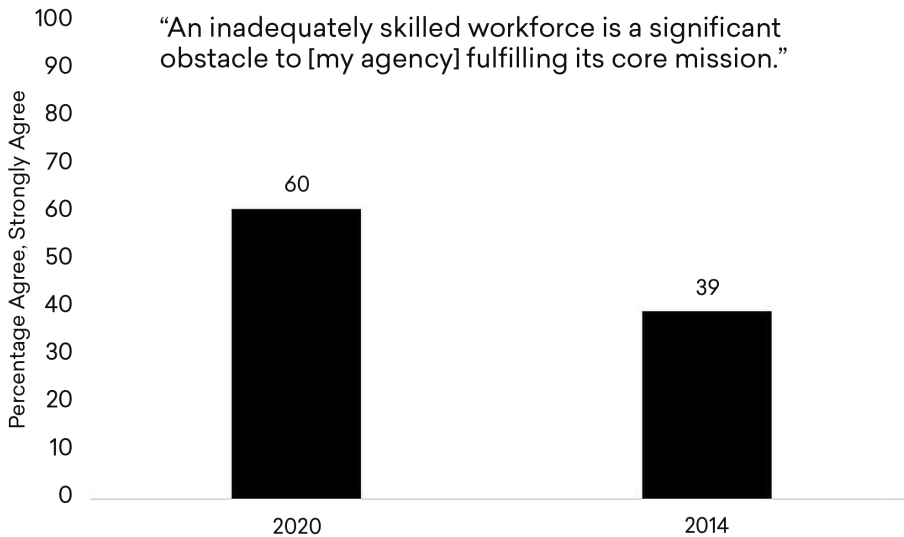
The public sector workforce does not comprise a random sample of U.S. workers. They tend to be older and better educated than workers in the private sector. They also tend to rate higher on what public administration scholars call “public service motivation,” a character trait related to the desire to help people and do good for others.²⁴ To get selected for an executive position in the federal government means you have to be talented and find some meaning from doing public work, since the pay becomes less competitive the higher you get in public service.²⁵ We asked federal executives whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?” About 80 percent reported being satisfied or very satisfied in their jobs, and 71 percent said the same about their agency (“Considering everything, how satisfied are you with [your agency]?”).²⁶

We probed a bit further, asking specifically about the current context and more general characteristics of their work that might influence satisfaction. We asked executives whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “The federal government is a good employer during a crisis.”²⁷ Three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. Respondents were more likely than their private sector counterparts to report that promotions in their organization were based upon a person’s ability (62 percent versus 53 percent) and recommend their agency as a good place to work (79 percent versus 76 percent). They were just as likely to report that their work environment “supports the development of new and innovative ideas” (68 percent versus 66 percent).²⁸

These features of public sector work led more than half of our survey participants to report that they are able to recruit and retain the best employees. Fifty-five percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “[My agency] is able to recruit the best employees,” and 57 percent confirmed the statement “[My agency] is able to retain its best employees.”²⁹ Whether one sees it as good news that 25–27 percent of federal managers cannot recruit or retain the best employees is a matter of perspective (the remainder neither agreed nor disagreed). The portion agreeing with these statements is about 10 percentage points higher than in 2014, however.³⁰ One explanation would relate to changes in federal personnel policy. Another explanation is that the improvement is due to changes in economic conditions. During periods of high unemployment and economic uncertainty, the government becomes a more attractive employer. It is easier to attract new workers and experienced federal employees are less likely to leave because of concerns about retirement income and fewer outside opportunities.

While most federal executives reported satisfaction in their work and agencies, they also reported serious and worsening capacity problems related to the quality and size of the federal workforce. To begin, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “An inadequately skilled workforce is a significant obstacle to [my agency] fulfilling its core mission.”³¹ As Figure 1 reveals,

Figure 1
Federal Executive Perception of Decline in Agency Capacity



Source: Survey on the Future of Government Service, 2020, <https://sfgs.princeton.edu>.

60 percent of 2020 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Only one-third reported that their workforce was adequate to fulfill its core mission. It is important to note that the question does not ask executives about common tasks across agencies like information processing, contract management, human resources, or legal work. It asks about *core* tasks, those central to the agency's mission. What are these core tasks? They range from providing national defense to delivering the mail to ensuring nondiscrimination in housing to approving patent applications. Across the government, federal executives report problems in the workforce that make fulfilling their core mission difficult.

This number is up from 39 percent in 2014, toward the end of the Obama administration. This is a striking change in responses between the two surveys. In 2014, we remarked that it was a serious concern when close to 40 percent of managers report a problem in their workforces. That number is now 60 percent.

Legal scholars tend to imagine the administrative state as a set of rules and guidance emanating from delegation of authority, but these formal actions have no force without persons to bring them to life, to translate law into policy through the hard work of interpretation and action. Agencies need people to animate law by conducting inspections, filing charges, managing contracts, negotiating agree-

ments, and writing reports. Laws assigning core tasks mean little if there is no robust administrative infrastructure to execute the law.

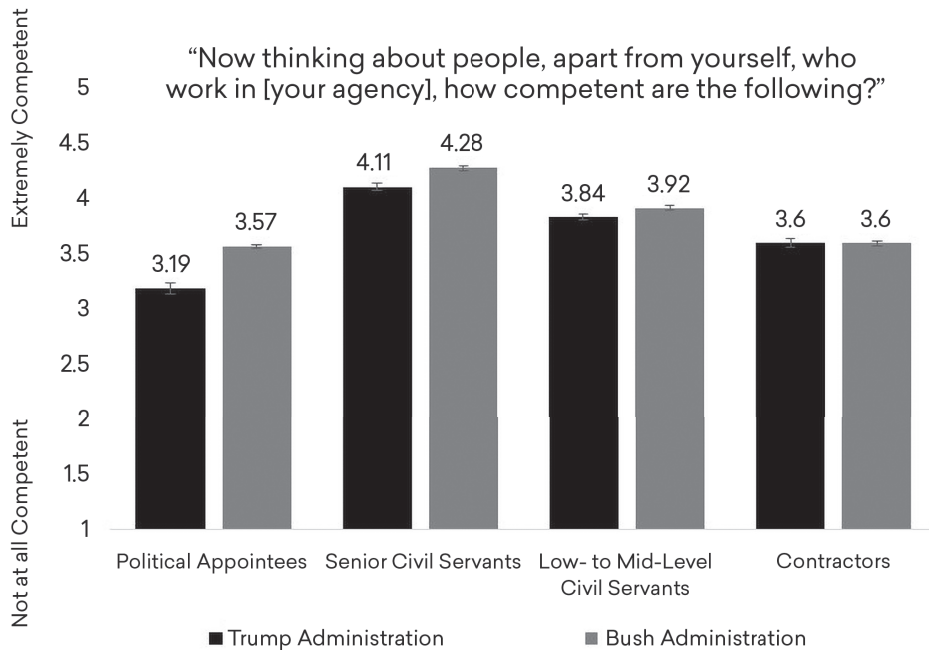
The evident decline in workforce skills between 2014 and 2020 could be due to a number of factors. First, the quality of the people working in federal agencies could be declining. That is, the people working in the agency could be, on average, just of lower ability. For example, agencies could be losing excellent experienced professionals to retirement or work in the private sector. The people who replace them may not be of the same quality. Second, the agency may simply have too few people. It might be the case that agency personnel are very talented but there just aren't enough of them. Third, there may be enough workers, but they might not have the right skills necessary to meet new challenges. For example, agencies may lack expertise to keep up with new developments in areas like information technology, artificial intelligence, data analytics, or contract management.

The survey includes questions that explore all three possibilities. In one set of questions, we asked respondents to evaluate the competence of the people they work with. Specifically, we asked, "Now thinking about people, apart from yourself, who work in [your agency], how competent are the following?" Respondents evaluated political appointees, senior civil servants, low- to mid-level civil servants, and contractors on a scale from one – not at all competent – to five – extremely competent. On scales of this type, we expect the evaluations to be anchored around the middle – three – because we expect that few people are "not at all competent" and "extremely competent" is a high bar.

The average 2020 response, during the Trump administration, is represented in Figure 2 as the black bar. I include responses to the same question in 2007, during George W. Bush's second term, as a comparison (we did not ask this question in 2014). In the far-left column, we see how federal executives rate the Trump administration's political appointees. On a one-to-five scale, the average rating is 3.19, significantly lower than the 3.57 that respondents rated Bush administration appointees in 2007.³² Respondents report that agency appointee leadership, on average, is middling. Some of the qualitative comments in the survey bolster this. One respondent wrote, "My concern in Department leadership is the lack of attention given to the qualifications of an individual selected for a political appointee position. They have no apparent requirement to understand, document and declare fidelity to agency mission."

Respondents rate the competence of career professionals higher, with those most senior rated as the most competent. The high rating for career professionals might reflect both a higher level of substantive expertise and a respondent bias in favor of agency specialists relative to appointee generalists. Indeed, appointee attention to administration goals over agency recommendations can lead respondents to confuse loyalty to the administration for a lack of competence. A number of qualitative responses suggest frustration with appointees' lack of commitment

Figure 2
Federal Executive Perception of Agency Competence



Source: Survey on the Future of Government Service, 2007, 2020, <https://sfgs.princeton.edu>; and Paul A. Volcker, Elizabeth L. Colagiuri, Richard N. Haas, et al., *The Changing Nature of Government Service* (Princeton, N.J.: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 2009).

to the agency’s mission. One writes, “Most of the political appointees come with ideas and often have no regard for the mission of the organization.”

Perhaps more notable in Figure 2, however, is the decline in the evaluation of *all* categories of federal workers: political appointees, senior civil servants, and low- to mid-level civil servants. Respondents rate the average competence of all classes of federal workers lower in 2020 than in 2007. (They rate contract employees about as competent as they were in 2007.) The biggest drop in the perceived competence of the workforce is in the appointee class, but all categories have declined.

Scholars and journalists have carefully documented the effects of the new administration’s approach and policies on departures and retirements among experienced senior civil servants. The rate of departure among career members of the Senior Executive Service was dramatically higher immediately after the 2016 election than after previous party change elections.³³ Others departed because of

frustration after trying to stick it out. Some of those who remained reported low morale and marginalization. One who remained wrote,

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

At least in this agency, choices of agency leadership led to departures and the decline in the competence of the workforce.

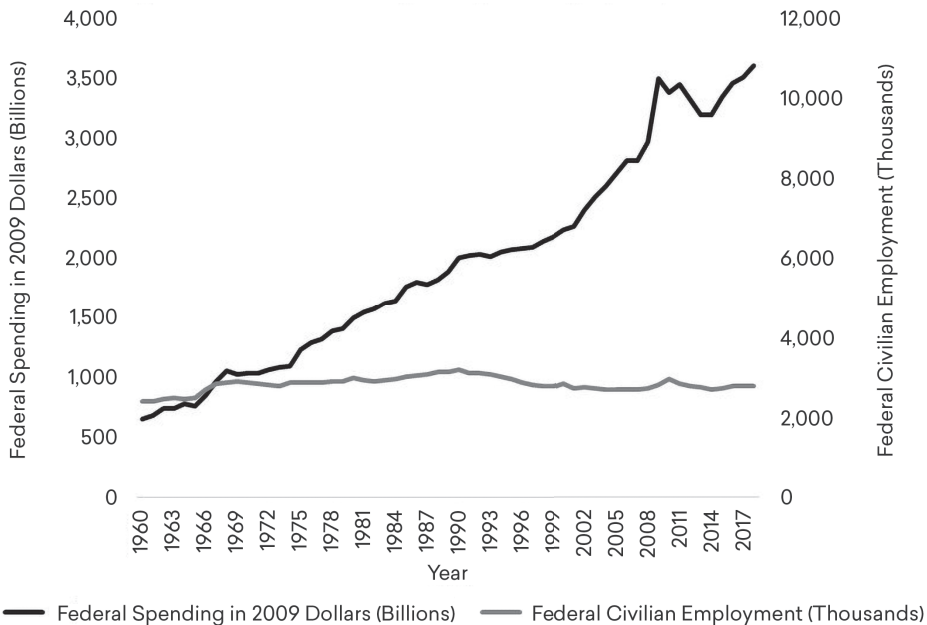
Long-standing difficulties recruiting young people into government service compound the skills problem, as agencies cannot replace departing personnel with promising new hires. Less than 8 percent of the federal workforce is under the age of thirty, half the percentage that is over the age of sixty.³⁴ Forty-five percent of executives report difficulties in recruitment, many pointing to bureaucratic issues and long-standing problems with how long it takes to hire.³⁵ One federal executive explained, “The [hiring] system is entirely broken. Executives and managers spend inordinate amounts of time trying to work around the rules of the entrenched Personnel Bureaucracy [*sic*] to successfully recruit qualified applicants. It is exhausting.” Others described the difficulty of recruiting young people to work in government because of bipartisan disparagement of government workers. One respondent is worth quoting at length:

But the previous administration (Obama) was not much better in terms of supporting the federal civil service. Both political parties take pleasure and benefit politically from denigrating “Washington bureaucrats” as over paid [*sic*], out of touch, incompetent, politically biased, and worse. The country believes them. In the court of public opinion no one of importance defends the value of the federal civil service (not talking about military here). So to your questions of whether we can recruit the best talent? First, we can’t hire anyone. Second, potential candidates are actively discouraged from seeking federal employment by the very people who lead two of the three branches of the Federal government.

This helpful elaboration highlights two issues: a recruitment problem (“no one wants to work here”) and a resource problem (“we can’t hire anyone”). One reason for the observed decline in the skill of the workforce may be that people of lower competence are replacing those departing government. Another may be that new hiring is not keeping up with departures or agency demand.

A striking feature of the federal government over the last sixty years has been the great mismatch between the expansion of its activities and administrative resources.³⁶ Figure 3 graphs the change in federal spending in inflation-adjusted dol-

Figure 3
Growth in Federal Spending and Employment, 1960 – 2018



Source: Federal spending data come from Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables, Table 1.1, Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits: 1789–2025. Employment data come from Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics: Federal Government, including U.S. Postal Service, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/home.htm>. Federal spending is an estimate from the historical table. Bureau of Labor Statistics employment data for 2018 are an average, excluding December.

lars and the number of federal employees. While spending has quintupled since 1960, the federal workforce in 2020 is not much bigger than it was at the end of the Eisenhower administration. There are a number of reasons why federal employment has lagged behind spending. First, the productivity of labor has increased. Simply put, fewer employees are necessary now to do the same amount of work. For example, the federal government needs fewer clerks and typists now than in 1960. Second, the increase in spending has largely been programmatic, meaning dollars flow more or less directly to recipients (such as through Social Security or grants to states) rather than to agency officials that use budgets and spend money. Finally, the federal government increasingly implements programs through arrangements with states and local governments or contracts with a web of nongovernment actors. Regardless, the federal government is managing a significantly

larger number of programs and dollars with about the same number of people. As one respondent wrote, “The administration places new missions without increasing your budget to meet the new demands. Agencies are forced to let civil service personnel go to make room for contractors to support their communities.” This places incredible strain on federal management, and the Government Accountability Office regularly highlights important skills gaps that reflect the growing mismatch.³⁷

We asked federal executives a number of questions about resources and managing in the modern era. The survey borrowed from surveys of private sector executives and asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “We have enough employees where I work to do a quality job.” Only 45 percent of federal executives agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.³⁸ By contrast, 58 percent of U.S. private sector executives agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. One distinct feature of the public sector is that managers do not always control decisions about how many people to hire and how to spend money. Elected officials, rather than agency managers, control budgets and the numbers of full-time employees. Trying to fulfill an agency’s core mission with too few employees may be one reason why federal executives evaluate the skills of their workforce as they do.

For a robust administrative state, managers need more than people; managers need the right equipment and the ability to train and develop their workforce. We asked federal managers their level of agreement with the statement “I feel I have the right tools and resources to do my job properly (equipment, software, etc.).”³⁹ Here there is no difference between the two sectors. Almost three-quarters of public and private sector managers reported having the right equipment. In addition, two-thirds of federal managers agreed that “[My agency] is able to provide necessary training for high performance.”⁴⁰

Collectively, these responses suggest that federal agencies have been unable to hire and restock departing talent, and this appears to be contributing to a decline in the perceived competence of the workforce. While most federal managers reported having access to necessary equipment, less than half reported having enough employees to do a quality job.

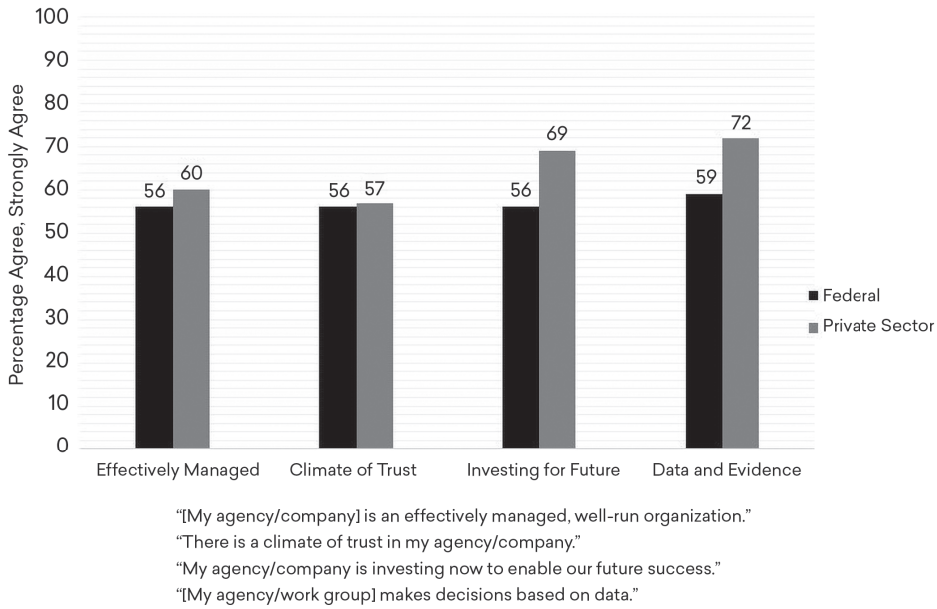
For some observers, the nation’s poor pandemic response had less to do with a lack of capacity in the workforce. Rather, the nation’s poor pandemic response boils down to bad management characterized by a lack of trust between the administration and civil servants and an unwillingness to rely on data and science in decision-making. Is that true across the government? Most respondents reported a climate of trust within their agencies and that their agencies make decisions based on data. Respondents overall had significantly lower trust in the White House, however.

To begin, we asked federal executives their level of agreement with the statement “[My agency] is an effectively managed, well-run organization.”⁴¹ As Figure 4 reveals, among respondents, 56 percent agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, compared with 60 percent in the private sector. It is a little hard to make sense of this topline number since respondents are themselves managers, key figures in the management team of their agency. It was a little like asking federal executives whether they were doing a good job. Appointees generally hold more responsibility and are more sanguine about how well agencies are managed. If we limit responses to career professionals, the percentage of executives agreeing that their agency is well run is closer to 55 percent.

Where federal executives have concerns about management, this often manifests itself in trust, particularly in the public sector. New political leaders have doubts about the intentions and competence of the organization’s rank-and-file and vice versa.⁴² Indeed, while in office, President Trump referred to civil servants as the “deep state” and part of the swamp that needs draining.⁴³ Civil servants used formal dissent channels and other means (such as inspectors general and whistleblower offices) to express their concerns about policy decisions and purported illegal activities.⁴⁴ A number of former officials spoke out against the Trump administration and its actions.⁴⁵ To see whether this reported mutual distrust had seeped down into agencies, we asked executives whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “There is a climate of trust in my agency.” Fifty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that there was a climate of trust.⁴⁶ This means that 44 percent did not agree with that statement. To put these numbers in perspective, the government percentage is slightly lower than responses from the private sector (57 percent agree or strongly agree). In the private sector, however, there is arguably an understanding that firms are about profits rather than the public interest.

These differences in trust may help explain differences in management approaches related to long-term planning. We asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “My agency is investing now to enable our future success.”⁴⁷ Fifty-six percent of federal executives agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 69 percent in the private sector. There are a number of possible explanations for this difference between the sectors. In the public sector, the breakdown in the federal budget process has meant that agencies are working from short-term stopgap funding to short-term stopgap funding. This makes it hard to plan. Elected officials, particularly during election years, also have a hard time planning for four-to-six years out, when they may no longer be in office. In an era of insecure majorities, the most important thing is the next election, not investing in agency capacity to prevent problems that are hard for the public to see or may never emerge.⁴⁸ The day-to-day work of good management – catching people doing the right thing, planning ahead for different contingencies, building robust workforces and processes – is rarely rewarded.

Figure 4
Federal versus Private Sector Management: Quality, Trust, Planning, Data



Source: The firm Mercer Sirota provided the private sector benchmarks to the Partnership for Public Service. Survey on the Future of Government Service, 2020, <https://sfgs.princeton.edu>.

Among respondents, 59 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that their agency “makes decisions based on data.”⁴⁹ When private sector executives were asked the same question about their companies, 72 percent agreed or strongly agreed that their company makes decisions based upon data. Public sector executives report significantly lower use of data in decision-making than their private sector counterparts. We do not have a comparable survey question from an earlier period to see whether the Trump administration relied less on data than its predecessors. There is some anecdotal evidence in the survey to this effect, however. For example, one respondent reported, “Our political leadership do not rely on facts or data, but on opinions. This is a dramatic change from anything I’ve experienced in my 30+ year career.”

Given the context of the pandemic, we also included a few questions about trust and leadership during the crisis. When we asked about the statement “I trust the senior leadership in [my agency] to respond well in a crisis,” 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed. When we asked about their level of agreement with the statement “I trust the White House to respond well in a crisis,” however, only 19 per-

cent agreed. Fully 53 percent *strongly disagreed* with that statement. While federal executives have comparable levels of trust and confidence in their organizational leadership, few have confidence in the White House.⁵⁰

As summer turned to fall, President Trump's handling of the COVID pandemic loomed over the 2020 election. The president uneasily defended his leadership role, while his contraction of the virus communicated its own truth about the crisis. Would another president have thwarted the pandemic? Could lives have been saved? The answer to these questions depends on what one believes about the distinctiveness of President Trump and his team *and* the robustness of the public health bureaucracy. The pandemic revealed breaches in the wall public health agencies were supposed to build around an emergent pandemic. Could any president have plugged them all?

As with other aspects of the Trump presidency, it is difficult to disentangle the actions of the bureaucracy from the man himself. The callous and ultimately ineffective response to Hurricane Maria and the hurried and haphazard efforts to increase immigration enforcement suggest both shortcomings in presidential leadership and long-standing capacity problems. Properly prepared, President Trump might have remedied these capacity problems, but he was not the first to neglect the effective management of the executive.⁵¹ The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) response to Hurricane Katrina under George W. Bush was woefully inadequate.⁵² The Department of the Interior had serious and long-standing problems in the Minerals Management Service prior to the Deepwater Horizon Gulf oil spill under President Obama.⁵³

The responses of federal executives illuminate both concerns about the current administration and long-standing problems. On the one hand, they reported satisfaction in their work and its importance. On the other hand, they reported frustration with choices by elected officials that make it difficult for them to fulfill their core mission. One respondent concluded, "I was really confused by this survey. [*sic*] what are you trying to learn? Here is what I want you to consider: the federal government is broken and after years of being abused, dismissed, underappreciated and treated like shit many talented people are going to leave. God help us." While there was a keen sense of worry and frustration targeted at the then-current White House, federal executives' frustration extended to earlier Democratic and Republican administrations.

Years of neglect have culminated in vulnerabilities manifesting themselves in increasingly regular and severe administrative failures. These failures put all of us at risk.

While the problems are serious, there are a few steps we can take that will go a long way toward ensuring a healthier administrative state. As with the pandemic, we can make it easier to diagnose disease and take steps to mitigate the growing

risks. One noteworthy feature of our survey was that we conducted it rather than the federal government. This should give us pause. Why do academics and non-profits have to collect data on the fundamental health of the administrative state? Shouldn't the federal government itself collect these data? Unfortunately, while the federal government collects voluminous data of various types, it often collects the wrong kind of data and lacks the analytic capacity to analyze the data it does collect. For example, the primary data the federal government collects to assess the health of the administrative state, the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), have limited value for modern human resources management, so much so that agencies are opting out: last year, the Department of Veterans Affairs (which employs 18.5 percent of the civilian federal workforce) decided to no longer participate.⁵⁴ The Partnership for Public Service, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit, conducts the primary analysis of the FEVS because the Office of Personnel Management does not have the capacity to do that work for itself. Providing improved data and analytic capacity inside the federal government would help increase the use of data and evidence in agency decision-making and incentivize elected officials to be attentive to the health of the bureaucracy.

Another way to ensure greater attention to the long-term health of the departments and agencies of government is to reduce the number of political appointees. There are more than 1,300 presidentially appointed executives that run federal agencies and programs. Many positions are vacant for long periods, particularly at the beginning and end of an administration. President Trump advanced nominees for only 39 percent of these positions during his first year. President Obama found candidates for 54 percent in his first year. Given the rancorous Senate confirmation process, this means that more than one-half of all executive positions were vacant for the first year of each president's term. When the president does fill these positions, executives generally serve for short stints.⁵⁵ Their focus naturally is on short-term political objectives rather than long-term agency capacity. This is one reason for the gap in answers between public and private sector executives in the degree of investment in the future. Short-timers, whether the presidential appointees or the temporary careerist fill-ins, cannot do long-term planning. Straightforward efforts to reduce the number of appointed positions would increase executive tenure and improve management.⁵⁶

In addition to improved data to diagnose problems and managerial changes that would make it easier to implement solutions, direct legislative changes can improve the federal personnel system. There is bipartisan agreement that the federal personnel system is broken. The civil service system was created to prevent abuse rather than advance the purposes of the federal government, and both Republicans and Democrats agree that there are problems with workforce recruitment and development, as well as recourse for dealing with poor performers. A number of reasonable proposals exist for comprehensive civil service reform that

strike a middle ground.⁵⁷ Such reforms would go a long way toward building back up what has been damaged.

The ongoing political discussion about pandemic response has shed light on the overall health of the agencies, people, and processes that make up the executive part of the federal government. Can the administrative state deliver the services, protections, and help that voters ask for? Not without careful monitoring and attention, ideally in advance of a worldwide pandemic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁶ David E. Lewis, “Deconstructing the Administrative State,” *Journal of Politics* 81 (3) (2019): 767–789.
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- ¹⁸ See Partnership for Public Service, *The Federal Government: A Nobel Profession* (Washington, D.C.: Partnership for Public Service, 2002), <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2002/12/193690852dfe6b696a3d8216af41ee89-1414079066.pdf>.

- ¹⁹ We surveyed all political appointees, all career members of the Senior Executive Service, all career members of the Senior Foreign Service in Washington, and comparable managers in agencies without members of the Senior Executive Service or Senior Foreign Service. We also surveyed top GS14 and GS15 managers running programs and agencies, identified by titles. We limited our sample to those with email addresses in the *Federal Yellow Book*. At the time of writing (the survey was still in the field), we had 952 responses, or about 5.5 percent of the sample. We report results weighted by appointment type, location, and agency.
- ²⁰ All results reported here are weighted top line results from the survey. $N=992$. Margin of error (MoE) is ± 3.3 for the full sample and ± 4.53 to 5.07 for half samples (depending upon some variation in sample size). For full details of the methods, see Government Service Survey, sfgs.princeton.edu.
- ²¹ The firm Mercer Sirota provided the private sector benchmarks to the Partnership for Public Service. Mercer Sirota conducts regular surveys of firms, including scores of questions, on a regular basis.
- ²² Given the complexity of reaching federal executives working at home during the pandemic, we left the survey in the field for several months. Federal executives working at home are harder to reach with paper letters and phone calls and so we had to rely on emails and voice mail messages to reach respondents. For details of the initial release, see Partnership for Public Service, “Partnership for Public Service Releases Preliminary Federal Executive Survey Data, Announces New Initiative to Renew the Federal Government,” October 14, 2020, <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/partnership-for-public-service-releases-preliminary-federal-executive-survey-data-announces-new-initiative-to-renew-the-federal-government/>.
- ²³ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “My work portfolio changed as a result of the pandemic.” Strongly disagree (12), Disagree (22), Neither agree nor disagree (7), Agree (32), Strongly agree (27); MoE ± 4.53 to 5.07 . “[My agency] has a sense of urgency for getting things done.” Strongly disagree (4), Disagree (8), Neither agree nor disagree (8), Agree (41), Strongly agree (38); MoE ± 3.33 . “The public services [my agency] provides suffered as a result of the pandemic.” Strongly disagree (17), Disagree (29), Neither agree nor disagree (11), Agree (24), Strongly agree (18); MoE ± 4.53 to 5.07 . “In [my agency] we had the IT tools necessary to telework effectively during the pandemic.” Strongly disagree (4), Disagree (9), Neither agree nor disagree (7), Agree (40), Strongly agree (40); MoE ± 4.53 to 5.07 .
- ²⁴ James L. Perry and Lois R. Wise, “The Motivational Bases of Public Service,” *Public Administration Review* 50 (3) (1990): 367–373.
- ²⁵ Most developed democracies have pay compression in their public sector workforces, paying a bit higher in wages and benefits at the low end of the pay scale relative to the private sector and a bit lower in wages and benefits at the higher end of the pay scale. For research on wage compression in the public sector, see, for example, George J. Borjas, “The Wage Structure and Sorting of Workers in the Public Sector,” NBER Working Paper 9313 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2002); and Domenico Depalo, Raffaella Giordano, and Evangelia Papapetrou, “Public-Private Wage Differentials in Euro-Area Countries: Evidence from Quantile Decomposition Analysis,” *Empirical Economics* 49 (3) (2015): 985–1015.
- ²⁶ “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?” Very dissatisfied (3), Dissatisfied (6), Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (10), Satisfied (43), Very satisfied (37);

- MoE $+/-3.33$. “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with [your agency]?” Very dissatisfied (4), Dissatisfied (11), Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (14), Satisfied (43), Very satisfied (28); MoE $+/-3.33$.
- ²⁷ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “The federal government is a good employer during a crisis.” Strongly disagree (2), Disagree (5), Neither agree nor disagree (18), Agree (48), Strongly agree (27); MoE $+/-4.53$ to 5.07.
- ²⁸ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “Promotions in [my agency/my company] are based on a person’s ability.” Strongly disagree (6), Disagree (12), Neither agree nor disagree (19), Agree (43), Strongly agree (19), Don’t know (1); MoE $+/-3.33$ (for government responses). “I recommend [my agency/my company] as a good place to work.” Strongly disagree (3), Disagree (6), Neither agree nor disagree (12), Agree (42), Strongly agree (37); MoE $+/-4.53$ to 5.07 (for government responses). “The work environment at [my agency] supports the development of new and innovative ideas.” Strongly disagree (6), Disagree (10), Neither agree nor disagree (15), Agree (43), Strongly agree (25); MoE $+/-4.53$ to 5.07 (for government responses).
- ²⁹ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “[My agency] is able to recruit the best employees.” Strongly disagree (7), Disagree (20), Neither agree nor disagree (19), Agree (38), Strongly agree (17), Don’t know (*); MoE $+/-4.53$ to 5.07. “My agency is able to retain its best employees.” Strongly disagree (5), Disagree (18), Neither agree nor disagree (19), Agree (44), Strongly agree (13), Don’t know (1); MoE $+/-3.33$.
- ³⁰ The 2014 results for “[My agency] is able to retain its best employees” are Strongly disagree (5), Disagree (28), Neither agree nor disagree (22), Agree (38), Strongly agree (7); MoE $+/-1.8$.
- ³¹ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “An inadequately skilled workforce is a significant obstacle to [my agency] fulfilling its core mission.” From 2020: Strongly disagree (12), Disagree (21), Neither agree nor disagree (6), Agree (21), Strongly agree (39), Don’t know (*); MoE $+/-4.53$ to 5.07. From 2014: Strongly disagree (13), Disagree (31), Neither agree nor disagree (17), Agree (25), Strongly agree (14); MoE $+/-2.6$.
- ³² The standard error of the ratings varies from 0.02 to 0.04.
- ³³ Joe Davidson, “Top Civil Servants Leaving Trump Administration at a Quick Clip,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/10/top-civil-servants-leaving-trump-administration-quick-clip/>; and Kathleen Doherty, David E. Lewis, and Scott Limbocker, “Executive Control and Turnover in the Senior Executive Service,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 29 (2) (2019): 159–174.
- ³⁴ Courtney Buble, “The Aging Federal Workforce Needs ‘New Blood,’ Experts Say,” *Government Executive*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2019/08/aging-federal-workforce-needs-new-blood-experts-say/159585/>.
- ³⁵ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “[My agency] often loses good candidates to other positions because of the time it takes to hire.” Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (11), Neither agree nor disagree (13), Agree (33), Strongly agree (40), Don’t know (2); MoE $+/-4.53$ to 5.07. Eighty-two percent of those who agreed with the statement “An inadequately skilled workforce is a significant obstacle to [my agency] fulfilling its core mission” identified the long hiring process as a contributor to their difficulty maintaining a skilled workforce. “To what extent do the fol-

- lowing factors contribute to the difficulty [your agency] has in maintaining a skilled workforce? Hiring process takes too long." Not at all (2), Little (4), Some (11), A good bit (23), A great deal (59), Don't know (1).
- ³⁶ Diulio, *Bring Back the Bureaucrats*.
- ³⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress in High-Risk Areas," March 2019, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/697245.pdf>.
- ³⁸ "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" "We have enough employees where I work to do a quality job." Strongly disagree (13), Disagree (30), Neither agree nor disagree (12), Agree (31), Strongly agree (14); MoE +/- 4.53 to 5.07.
- ³⁹ "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" "I feel I have the right tools and resources to do my job properly (equipment, software, etc.)." Strongly disagree (4), Disagree (14), Neither agree nor disagree (10), Agree (46), Strongly agree (27); MoE +/- 3.33.
- ⁴⁰ "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" "[My agency] is able to provide necessary training for high performance." Strongly disagree (4), Disagree (13), Neither agree nor disagree (14), Agree (44), Strongly agree (23); MoE +/- 3.33.
- ⁴¹ "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" "[My agency/ Company] is an effectively managed, well-run organization." Strongly disagree (9), Disagree, (15) Neither agree nor disagree (20), Agree (37), Strongly agree (19); MoE +/- 3.33.
- ⁴² William G. Resh, *Rethinking the Administrative Presidency: Trust, Intellectual Capital, and Appointee-Careerist Relations in the George W. Bush Administration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).
- ⁴³ Evan Osnos, "Trump vs. the 'Deep State': How the Administration's Loyalists Are Quietly Reshaping American Governance," *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/21/trump-vs-the-deep-state>.
- ⁴⁴ Juliet Eilperin, Lisa Rein, and Marc Fisher, "Resistance from Within: Federal Workers Push Back against Trump," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/resistance-from-within-federal-workers-push-back-against-trump/2017/01/31/c65b110e-e7cb-11e6-b82f-687d6e6a3e7c_story.html.
- ⁴⁵ Kimberly Dozier, "As Election Day Nears, More of Trump's Former Officials Are Speaking Out against Him," *Time* magazine, September 24, 2020, <https://time.com/5892948/trump-former-officials-speak-out/>.
- ⁴⁶ To put this in perspective, the percentage is slightly but not overwhelmingly higher in the private sector (57 percent). "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" "There is a climate of trust in my agency/company." Strongly disagree (10), Disagree (19), Neither agree nor disagree (15), Agree (37), Strongly agree (19); MoE +/- 3.33 (government responses only).
- ⁴⁷ "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" "[My agency/ Company] is investing now to enable our future success." Strongly disagree (7), Disagree (16), Neither agree nor disagree (19), Agree (34), Strongly agree (22); MoE +/- 3.33 (government responses only).

- ⁴⁸ Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- ⁴⁹ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “[My agency/work group] makes decisions based on data.” Strongly disagree (7), Disagree (14), Neither agree nor disagree (18), Agree (37), Strongly agree (22), Don’t know (2); MoE +/-3.33 (government responses only).
- ⁵⁰ “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” “I trust the senior leadership in [my agency] to respond well in a crisis.” Strongly disagree (7), Disagree (13), Neither agree nor disagree (9), Agree (35), Strongly agree (35), Don’t know (*); MoE +/-4.53 to 5.07. “I trust the White House to respond well in a crisis.” Strongly disagree (53), Disagree (17), Neither agree nor disagree (9), Agree (10), Strongly agree (9), Don’t know (1); MoE +/-4.53 to 5.07.
- ⁵¹ Paul C. Light, “A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It” (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Light_Cascade-of-Failures_Why-Govt-Fails.pdf.
- ⁵² David E. Lewis, *The Politics of Presidential Appointments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- ⁵³ Chris Good, “Head of Minerals Management Service Resigns,” *The Atlantic*, May 27, 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/05/head-of-minerals-management-service-resigns/57344/>.
- ⁵⁴ Nicole Ogrysko, “VA Drops the FEVS in Favor of Its Own Employee Engagement Survey,” *Federal News Network*, June 28, 2018, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/all-news/2018/06/va-drops-the-fevs-in-favor-of-its-own-employee-engagement-survey/>.
- ⁵⁵ Matthew Dull and Patrick S. Roberts, “Continuity, Competence, and the Succession of Senate-Confirmed Agency Appointees, 1989–2009,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39 (3) (2009): 432–453; and Anne Joseph O’Connell, “Vacant Offices: Delays in Staffing Top Agency Positions,” *University of Southern California Law Review* 82 (5) (2009): 913–1000.
- ⁵⁶ David E. Lewis, “How to Solve the Vacancies Problem That Looms over Federal Government,” *The Hill*, June 4, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/501101-how-to-solve-the-vacancies-problem-that-looms-over-federal-government>.
- ⁵⁷ See, for example, this set of proposals by the Volcker Alliance and the Partnership for Public Service, “Renewing America’s Civil Service” (New York: Volcker Alliance and the Partnership for Public Service, 2017), <https://www.volckeralliance.org/sites/default/files/Renewing-Americas-Civil-Service.pdf>; and Partnership for Public Service, *A New Civil Service Framework* (New York: Partnership for Public Service, 2018), https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Building_the_Enterprise__A_New_Civil_Service_Framework-2014.04.01.pdf.