Executive Control and Turnover in the Senior Executive Service

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Abstract

If presidents wish to see their policy priorities implemented, they need control over key decision-making positions often occupied by career executives. This article examines whether political conflict with a new administration drives career executives from their positions. This can happen because presidents target specific individuals or because career professionals anticipate conflict and strategically exit before a new president takes office. To assess this dynamic, we use novel data that combine individual survey responses with personnel records to analyze the probability that an agency executive departs her position from March 2015 to July 2017. Given our findings that turnover is driven by both presidential marginalization and strategic exit by bureaucrats, we conclude with implications for presidential efforts to control the bureaucracy.

Modern governance is increasingly bureaucratic governance. Legislatures have responded to the expanding volume and complexity of government work by delegating more policymaking authority to the administrative state. In the U.S. government of close to 2.8 million civilian employees, only a fraction of management positions are filled by political appointment. Members of the permanent bureaucracy staff the remainder of important positions. In theory, career executives staffing agencies are neutral and serve presidents of either party equally well. Yet, many career executives have preferences over the direction of agency policymaking that conflict those of the president. The strength of those preferences may make it difficult for them to work with an administration and some may resist implementation of the president’s policy agenda if it conflicts with their views. Ideological conflict between career executives and the president affects both the incentives of presidents to control agencies and the incentives of career executives to remain in their position. In this article, we ask whether position and ideology affect the departure decisions of civil servants after elections.

The transition from President Obama to President Trump illustrates the conflict between presidents and career executives and its implications for the career decisions of civil servants. In news reports, career executives describe the new administration’s use of tactics intended to drive them from their positions, including involuntary reassignments, exclusion from policymaking, and being asked to retire (Clement 2017; Cohen 2017; Price 2017; Shear and Lichtblau 2017). For example, a scientist in the Department of the Interior described being involuntarily reassigned from a policy analyst position that focused on adaptation to climate change to an accounting office (Clement 2017). Others explain that exit is the result of deep disagreement with the policies of the Trump administration (Cohen 2017; Price 2017; Rank 2017). These anecdotal accounts suggest an exodus of federal bureaucrats who find themselves in conflict with the Trump administration with some exiting before the transition and others after. In what follows, we aim to provide a careful exploration of how the political environment affects departures of high-level bureaucrats.
If presidents wish to see their priorities implemented, they need to establish control over key decision-making positions. Some positions exert more authority over the direction of agency policymaking, particularly individuals in positions that personnel officials have labeled as “choke points” for policymaking (Heclo 1977; Lewis 2011; Lewis and Waterman 2013). These are positions that are the spigots of policymaking in the agencies. Persons holding such positions often must sign off on key decisions. We contend that presidents are more likely to target those in such positions. We also expect that presidents are more likely to marginalize individuals with ideologically divergent preferences who are unlikely to support their agenda. As a result, turnover among these individuals should increase after a presidential transition. Yet, because of the protections that civil service rules provide, we argue that the incentives of career officials also affect turnover. We contend that after an election, career executives consider working conditions under a new presidential administration, and some will strategically exit before a transition occurs if they anticipate conflict under the new administration.

We assess presidential efforts to control positions filled by high-level career executives by examining the behavior of members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) through the transition from President Obama to President Trump. Members of the SES typically occupy top-level positions, and by design, serve as the link between the administration and the career officials more generally. They are a class of career bureaucrats that have an impact on policymaking in the agency and are visible enough that they may be targeted by a presidential administration. Although we focus on the SES, we believe that our argument is generalizable to other career executives at a comparable level of management, but do not expect that argument extends to those occupying lower level positions (Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017).

To test the claims advanced in the article, we use a novel dataset that combines individual survey responses (providing details of career executives’ positions and policy views) with personnel records (providing details about their careers including exit). With this data, we analyze the probability that an agency executive departs her position each month from March 2015 to July 2017. In the past, it has been difficult to identify key positions and examine both the views and actual careers of their occupants. Yet with access to new data, we are able to obtain information about an individual career executive’s ideology, professional responsibilities, and exit decisions. The paper leverages new data to assess these questions more systematically and with greater precision than has been previously possible.

We find suggestive evidence that in the transition from President Obama to President Trump, individuals in positions with more authority over the direction of policymaking are more likely to leave. Departure is clearly more likely when civil servants experience ideological conflict with the president. After President Trump’s election, liberal executives were more likely to depart than conservative executives. This contrasts with the 2 years prior to the election, when ideology is not associated with departure decisions. Departures by ideologically distant career executives enhance presidential control over key positions held by career service personnel because turnover provides the new administration with the opportunity to promote like-minded bureaucrats to important positions.

We conclude that new presidential administrations have substantial latitude to reshape the key positions in government held by civil servants, partly because of voluntary choices made by these career executives. Of course, the cost of this form of control is the loss of experienced civil servants. Knowledgeable and experienced career executives are vital for the successful implementation of complex policies and the presence of executives with views contrary to the president checks the influence of the new administration on policy outcomes (Harris and Milks 1989; Rourke 1990).

### Presidential Control and Exit Decisions

Extensive research examines the factors that drive turnover among agency personnel.

Some scholars have examined how factors, such as job security, agency-specific expertise, policy discretion, and job market conditions, affect a civil servant’s incentives to remain in the agency and develop expertise (Bertelli and Lewis 2013; Gailmard and Patty 2007, 2012; Huber and McCarty 2004). Others focus on the impact of economic opportunity and paths of professional advancement on the decision to remain in a position or depart (Adolph 2013; Lee and Whitford 2008; Teodoro 2011; Whitford and Lee 2015). Another important area examines the influence of public service motivation and values on the decision to remain in public service (see, e.g., Bright 2008; Perry and Wise 1990). Research has also explored how organizational factors, such as performance pay, affect career decisions (Bertelli 2006; Pandey, Wright, and Moynihan 2008; Pitts, Marvel, and Fernandez 2011).

The political environment also importantly shapes exit. The primary means by which presidents exert

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1 Although the argument applies to top-level career bureaucrats and is tested on a sample of career SES, we refer to these individuals with several terms, including career executives and civil servants throughout the text.
control over the bureaucracy is through the strategic use of personnel (see, e.g., Durant 1987, 1992; Nathan 1975; Weko 1995). Scholars have carefully examined presidential strategies for controlling agency personnel through appointments (see, e.g., Heclo 1977; Mackenzie 1981; Moe 1985; Lewis 2008; Light 1995; Pfiffner 1996; Weko 1995). Considerably less research assesses how senior career executives respond to conflict with elected officials and their appointees. Scholars have examined executive self-reports from interviews and surveys that highlight instances of appointees marginalizing ideologically divergent bureaucrats, particularly during the Nixon and Reagan administrations (e.g., Aberbach and Rockman 2000; Durant 1987, 1992; Golden 1992, 2000; Maranto 1993, 2005; Nathan 1975). Although one response to conflict is shirking or sabotage, another is for bureaucrats with skills to exit the agency (Bertelli and Lewis 2013; Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017; Brehm and Gates 1997; Cameron and de Figueiredo 2017; Golden 1992, 2000; Richardson 2016). Recent research has found aggregate turnover is higher in a transition year and in agencies ideologically distant from the president (Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017). Yet despite advances, our knowledge of the impact of political conflict on career executives is limited because existing research has not been able to systematically track both individual-level ideology and career choices. Understanding the extent of presidential control of key positions in the career civil service is vital to understanding the presidency, the insulation of civil servants from politics, and the role of presidents and civil servants in the public policy process.

Explaining Turnover in Key Positions

This section first discusses constraints on the president’s ability to alter the composition of personnel and the strategies presidents have employed to circumvent constraints. Then we consider the conditions under which turnover in key positions is likely to occur. We conclude that turnover, and ultimately president’s ability to alter the composition of personnel and the strategies presidents have employed to circumvent constraints, is influenced both by the conditions that incentivize an administration to marginalize bureaucrats and those that incentivize bureaucrats to exit.

Presidents and Continuing Professional Personnel: Institutional Constraints

Presidents operate within a set of institutional constraints on their ability to alter the composition or placement of bureaucrats. Congress has created a personnel system loosely divided between political appointees and career executives that have different levels of protection against removal. The ease of transfer or removal varies depending on the location of the official in the hierarchy. Political appointees are the easiest to remove as they usually serve at the pleasure of the president, whereas career professionals in the traditional civil service are the most difficult.

Although new presidents may possess strong incentives to control key positions in agencies, they are limited in their ability to alter the composition of the incumbent team by civil service regulations that apply to the bulk of agency employees. Merit system principles require that civil service employees be hired, promoted, demoted, and fired on the basis of merit. Disagreements over politics or policy are not legitimate motivations for transfer or removal. Ideally, civil servants serve either party equally well, and merit, rather than politics, determines position and pay.

The SES consists of managerial positions that sit between traditional civil service employees and the Senate-confirmed (PAS) political appointees that administer government agencies. Individuals in the SES occupy top-level management positions with responsibilities such as directing the work of a unit, exercising important policymaking functions, and being held accountable for program success. They report involvement in every phase of policy development and have frequent contact with political officials in executive branch (Dolan 2000). There are about 7,000 SES managers composed of career civil servants and a maximum of 10% of noncareer (i.e., politically appointed) members. Presidents have greater, though still restricted, flexibility to reassign a member of the SES after a certain length of time. This provides administration officials the authority to put people of their own choosing in some key positions. An incoming administration will likely scrutinize individuals in the SES more than other career executives because of their potential to influence the direction of agency policymaking.

Although civil service rules provide protections against removal, enterprising presidential administrations have found ways of working around the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. Nixon White House Aide, Fred Malek, famously circulated the Federal Political Personnel Manual to administration officials detailing informal ways of working around civil service rules to get civil servants to leave their jobs.

2 For a good overview, see Kaufman (1965) or Ingraham (1995).
3 A subset of appointees cannot be removed by the president except for cause (Lewis and Selin 2012).
5 Career members of the Senior Executive Service may be reassigned more easily than other federal employees. See Office of Personnel Management, Guide to the Senior Executive Service, March 2017, pp. 10–11.
Creating vacancies to be filled with ideological allies (U.S. Congress 1973). Recommended tactics included bluntly asking the executive to move on or assigning them to a project with responsibilities (like travel or a new location) that would make it difficult for them to remain. Alternatively, the manual encouraged appointees to use reorganizations or parallel processes to marginalize or dislodge troublesome career executives from key positions. Testifying before a Senate committee, Malek detailed how the administration would submit lists of names to agency personnel offices to give a “political push,” so that when vacancies arose individuals supportive of the president’s agenda were promoted (quoted in Cole and Caputo 1979, 403).

Examples of these tactics can be found in the behavior of political appointees over time. When interviewed about his tenure as Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Dr. James Goddard, appointed by President Johnson, emphasized the importance of placing staff committed to his agenda in positions of power and described using reorganizations and transfers to sideline troublesome civil servants (Interview with James Goddard 1969, 172, 178, 180, 316–8, 475). The Reagan administration created teams of political officials or “shadow staffs” used to bypass career managers (Aberbach and Rockman 1990; Ingraham 1987). Famously, President Reagan’s first Environmental Protection Agency administrator, Anne Gorsuch, compiled hit lists of personnel whose policy preferences conflicted with those of the administration and targeted these employees for reassignment, demotion, or removal (Golden 2000, 121–6). President Trump’s Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke testified before Congress that he employed reassignments as a strategy to encourage departures among agency employees.7

What is clear from the examples above is that presidents have used personnel decisions to control agency policy. Presidents have sought to control not only the selection of appointees but also key career positions. Despite historical examples and case studies, there is very little systematic information about how bureaucrats anticipate and respond to targeting. Top civil servants, knowing presidents and new administrations use these tactics, should anticipate this form of presidential influence. When these civil servants exit, the administration gains greater control of the executive branch by selecting the exiting civil servant’s replacement. An assessment of turnover provides insight into the scope of presidential marginalization and the conditions under which the strategic incentives of bureaucrats facilitate presidential control.

Marginalization

Presidents do not need to establish control over all career executives to control an agency. Some positions have more influence on the pace and content of policy change than others (see, e.g., Haglund 2014; Kumar 2009; Parsneau 2013). Even among individuals in the upper echelons of the civil service, the ability to influence policymaking varies considerably. Some career executives hold key positions that personnel officials have labeled as “choke points” for policymaking (Heclo 1977; Lewis 2011). Individuals in choke point positions have the ability to slow down or shift policymaking toward their preferred outcomes.8 Limits on the time and attention of a new administration increase the probability that presidents and their appointees target key positions rather than attempt to displace bureaucrats on a wide scale.

Agency authority is often expansive, but agencies typically suffer resource constraints that limit their ability to equally pursue all policy activities within their purview. An individual in a position responsible for managing a broad range of agency policymaking activities is more likely to be able to affect the direction of policymaking because she has influence over how agencies balance competing priorities. If a career executive influences how agencies prioritize certain policy activities at the expense of others, she will be able to delay or elevate presidential priorities.

Consider the policy influence of the career executive who heads the Counterterrorism section in the Department of Justice. This individual is responsible for investigating and prosecuting domestic and international terrorism cases among other activities and has discretion over the types of investigations the department pursues as well as their pace. The head of the Office of Ground and Drinking Water in the Environmental Protection Agency, also a career executive, is responsible for developing and implementing national drinking water standards and overseeing source water protection. Other career executives construct budget and spending plans such as the chief financial officer in the National Institutes of Health. Individuals in these positions have the opportunity to influence the direction and pace of policymaking in the offices they oversee.

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6 Presidents may also strategically leave positions vacant to minimize the impact of career officials on policy in a particular area.


8 The White House Transition Project has developed a similar concept for appointed positions. They identify the most important appointed positions referred to as “stand up positions” and track president’s ability to fill these positions. See http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/appointments/.
Past presidents have recognized the importance of controlling key positions. Presidents have transformed some key policy positions held by career executives into political appointments or bypassed career officials with temporary teams of political appointees (Heclo 1975, 1977; Ingraham, Thompson, and Eisenberg 1995; Lewis 2008, 2011). Given the size and scope of executive branch authority, replacing career executives is not always possible nor is always desirable considering the potential costs to expertise of extensive politicization. As an alternative, presidents and their appointees may marginalize career officials in key positions to create an opening. Once the position is open, agency appointees may promote another individual within the agency who is more supportive of the president’s agenda.

Over the course of an administration, career executives that reveal themselves as unable to work with a presidential administration are less likely to rise to key positions and more likely to be reassigned or to exit. Therefore, we expect that when an administration leaves office, the executives that remain in key positions are those that can work effectively with the current administration. If a new president of the opposing party assumes office, the incoming administration is likely to have conflict with those bureaucrats promoted to key positions under the previous administration. We expect that following a transition presidents are more likely to target individuals in important positions, particularly if she has responsibility for setting agency policy priorities. These individuals were likely chosen by the previous administration and have the ability to substantially influence policy in their agency.

H1 Choke Points: Departure in a civil service position is more likely if the individual held an important policy position under the previous administration.

Although civil servants are presumed to be neutral, many possess political and policy views that affect their ability to work with certain administrations. The views of civil servants commonly conflict with those of the presidential administration in power (see, e.g., Aberbach and Rockman 2000; Clinton et al. 2012; Golden 1992, 2000). Bureaucrats vary in the strength and visibility of these commitments to political supervisors. Given limitations on time and information, a new president will likely focus their efforts on those career executives who they expect will be most damaging to the implementation of their agenda.

If a career bureaucrat occupies a key position, the benefits of controlling this position increase as the policy preferences of the career bureaucrat and the presidential administration diverge. There is little incentive to exert effort to marginalize bureaucrats supportive of the presidential agenda except for reasons of incompetence. Presidential appointees may identify individuals whose beliefs and partisan identity make it likely that they will undermine the president’s agenda and prefer to entrust their responsibilities to a civil servant more supportive of the president’s preferred policies. Although presidents are constrained by the need for a degree of competence, all else equal, individual civil servants whose views diverge from those of the administration are more likely to be targeted for removal. Presidents cannot replace civil servants in troublesome agencies wholesale. Rather, presidents must target specific key individuals within the agency to bring divergent agencies in line. Individual-level targeting also allows presidents to gain control over otherwise sympathetic agencies where careerists with divergent preferences may have risen to key positions under the previous administration. We assess preference divergence between the president and a career executive with individual-level measures of party and ideology.

H2 Ideology: Departure in a civil service position is more likely as the preferences of the civil servant diverge from the president.

Strategic Exit

The choices of incumbent civil servants themselves also affect departure decisions because of the protections that civil service rules provide. Departure decisions in the civil service are complex choices shaped by a number of factors, including external electoral and political forces. Existing research explores many factors that shape the career choices of government workers, including the transferability of skills, policy discretion, recruitment, opportunities for professional advancement, and the economic climate, among others (see, e.g., Adolph 2013; Bertelli and Lewis 2013; Gailmard and Pauty 2012; Golden 1992, 2000; Teodoro 2011). The complexity of exit decisions suggested by this research reflects the diversity of individuals serving in the federal government. Yet, the election of new presidents importantly shapes the career decisions of these key policymaking officials in the midst of this diversity.

As Downs (1967) observed, the motivations of federal employees are not uniform. For some career executives, the value they derive from their position is related to their ability to influence policy or advance their understanding of the agency’s mission, whereas others weigh other factors such as compensation or advancement more (Downs 1967; Gailmard and Pauty 2007, 2012; Prendergast 2007). Political conflict influences career executive’s ability to influence policy, alters policy in ways they prefer (or not), and can influence the value of career opportunities inside and outside of government. As a result, conflict should
of a transition and conflict with a new administration. If anticipation drives at least some departures, it should occur in the period between the election and inauguration. Although ideological conflict predicts presidential marginalization and strategic exit, the key difference is the timing of departure. This leads to a final hypothesis:

H3 Strategic Exit: The anticipation of ideological distance between a civil servant and incoming president increases between the election and inauguration.

Strategic exit highlights a form of presidential influence that does not require overt presidential action. If civil service managers voluntarily depart rather than work with a new administration, new presidents may gain influence without having to actively marginalize any career executives. New administrations may have the opportunity to fill vacancies with career executives that more closely align with their preferences. At minimum, presidents get a new person in the job less connected to the executives and policymaking of the last administration. Regardless of why career executives exit, their departure augments the new administration’s ability to shape the career service personnel who occupy important positions.

In sum, the incentives of both presidential administrations and career bureaucrats affect turnover in key policymaking positions. Presidents should initiate turnover pressure more often in key positions and when policy conflict between the career bureaucrat and administration is high. The decisions of career executives also affect agency turnover as they anticipate their role in a new administration as well as the availability of other employment opportunities.

Data, Variables, and Methods

To examine presidially driven turnover among key civil servants, we need a means of identifying these officials as well as information about their ideological beliefs and exit decisions. The SES provides an important linkage between appointees and civil servants in the traditional merit system. Yet, these officials are often only observable to the administration and attentive congressional staff or interest groups, and their ideology is not public information. We use survey

9 We also note that there may be conditions under which strong partisans or ideologues with a long time horizon are motivated to wait out an administration or try and make a difference (Cameron and de Figueiredo 2017; Limbocker 2018).

10 The inauguration imperfectly differentiates between exit in anticipation of conflict and marginalization. Prior to inauguration, departure is driven by anticipation of conflict with the new administration. After inauguration, some career executives may observe marginalization of other employees or know that her preferences are in conflict with the policies pressed by the new administration and depart prior to be actively marginalized.
data to identify a sample of career SES officials and their beliefs. Then we match survey respondents to personnel records to track departures over time. We include full step-by-step details of the data collection in appendix A.

The 2014 Survey on the Future of Government Service surveyed all career members of the SES (Richardson 2016). The survey was fielded between August and December of 2014. Importantly, the survey included questions that allow us to identify choke point positions as well as the ideology and partisanship of officials filling these positions.12

Of key interest to this study are the departures of career SES members. We use actual exit rather than intended exit.13 To determine which career executives left public service in the period before and after the 2016 election, we use data from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Federal Yellow Book (a directory of government officials).14 These two sources allow us to identify which survey respondents remained in government in the periods before and after the survey. In 2016, OPM released data on federal employees by name and quarter from 1973 to September of 2016.15 The release of specific names allowed us to connect personnel records to the survey response records. To trace exits after September 2016, we matched survey respondents to data downloaded each month after the election from the online version of the Federal Yellow Book.

After matching and cleaning the data, we are able to track the careers of 821 SES members who took the survey. We follow their careers from March 2015 to July 2017. Of the 821, 285 departed (35%), 77 during election season (September 1, 2016 to November 30, 2016) and 75 in the period after the election (December 1, 2016 to July 31, 2017). (Table 1) As these data suggest, for many members of the SES, a presidential election is an important career event (Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017). Career executives leave during election season rather than work with an incoming administration.16 Some anticipate marginalization and others prefer simply not to have to bring another team of appointees up to speed.

Key Independent Variables
We expect that members of the SES with key policymaking power are more likely to depart after the election. Generally, all members of the SES have some management responsibility and so most SES members are in “choke point”-type positions. But, within the SES there is still variation in roles and responsibilities and certain kinds of positions are more important for policymaking than others. A choke point position could be one where the scope of policymaking authority is broad.17 The survey asked respondents to identify their job responsibilities from a list of nine managerial responsibilities. The survey asked:

Does your job deal directly with decisions about [Yes, No]:

- Information management (e.g., Information Technology, Database Management)
- Managing completion of agency priorities once priorities are set
- Grants to state and local governments, other organizations, or individuals
- Deciding what enforcement responsibilities to prioritize
- Allocation of personnel to different jobs or offices
- Budget formulation/proposals
- Setting overall priorities in [agency name]
- Procurement and contract management
- Developing Notices of Proposed Rulemaking, summarizing related comments, writing final rules

12 The response rate for career executives was 26%, and the sample of SES respondents looks similar to the population of executives (Richardson 2016).
13 Intention is an imperfect measure of exit and different factors predict actual versus intended exit (Cohen, Blake, and Goodman 2016).
16 Some career executives are asked to serve in an acting role in a position designated for a political appointee. Serving in an acting capacity may increase the likelihood of being targeted for removal, but may also increase a sense of obligation to stay. We must rely on job titles to identify acting officials in the data. To be conservative, we exclude these cases in the models below, but we also estimated models including them with a control (see supplementary appendix). The substantive conclusions are the same.
17 Alternatively, a choke point position could be one with a particular kind of policymaking authority (e.g., budget/fiscal versus rulemaking/enforcement). We use data from the survey to measure this concept also. We conducted exploratory factor analysis on responses to these nine questions. The Cronbach’s alpha for the count of managerial responsibilities is 0.57. Unrotated loadings suggest a single factor, whereas rotated loadings suggest two factors. Analysis suggests a budget, fiscal, and contract management dimension and a policy, rulemaking, and enforcement dimension. We estimate models that include factor scores for these two dimensions as measures of different kinds of management positions. Results indicate that increase in policy, rulemaking, and enforcement responsibilities is associated with a higher probability of departure. Results are reported in supplementary appendix.
To measure the breadth of responsibility, we include a count of the number of “Yes” answers to the options above. Respondents answered “Yes” to an average of 5.07 responsibilities (median 5; SD 2.10; minimum 0, maximum 9). Most of our executives report being involved in management of the completion of agency priorities (90%), formulating budgets (75%), managing personnel (75%), and setting agency priorities (67%). Fewer report being directly involved with grants to state and local government (30%), rulemaking (36%), or setting enforcement priorities (37%). There were 24 respondents who answered “No” to all of the questions. We exclude them from the sample, concluding either they were in the sample by mistake or they did not read the question carefully.18 Our expectation is that positions with a broader scope of responsibilities will have higher departure probabilities.

Of course, the risks of departure for persons in key positions may also be influenced by the preferences of the careerist as predicted by H2 and H3.19 We evaluate the possibility that careerist ideology influences turnover using the executive’s self-reported ideology. Ideology is measured on the standard seven-point scale (very liberal—5.8%; liberal—14.5%; somewhat liberal—18.1%; moderate—38.5%; somewhat conservative—13.7%; conservative—6.5%; very conservative—0.6%; don’t know—2.3%). We exclude “Don’t know” respondents and 120 respondents who do not answer the ideology question. We note, however, that coding these responses differently (i.e., coding missing responses as “Moderate”) does not influence the results. (See supplementary appendix for results.) Our expectation is that liberal career executives will be more likely to leave after the 2016 election because they are more likely to expect that President Trump will be hostile their preferences (H2). Liberal career executives will find the work less satisfying and are more likely to experience marginalization under the new administration. By contrast, conservatives should be more likely to stay.20

To further assess the effect of preference divergence on departure, we estimate models using either individual partisanship or agency ideology. We measure partisanship on the standard five-point scale (Democrat—46.3%; Lean Democrat—13.3%; Independent—20.4%; Lean Republican—5.9%; Republican—14.2%). To measure agency ideology, we use measures developed by Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2018) based on expert ratings. We expect that after the election Democrats will depart at higher rates than Republicans. We also expect that employees in liberal agencies will depart at greater rates than those in conservative agencies.

Controls
Of course, other agency-specific and individual factors may influence the probability a person departs. Models

18 We have also estimated models including the respondents that claimed no significant managerial responsibility. The estimates are substantively similar but smaller and estimated less precisely (p < .32).
19 If ideology is associated with job opportunities, results could be biased. We test whether ideology is correlated with having been approached with an outside job offer in the last year and find that ideology is not correlated with opportunities (corr = −0.0036 in estimation sample).
20 We have also estimated models with an interaction between ideology and the scope of responsibility because the effect of ideology may be influenced by a civil servant’s position in the hierarchy. These models reveal that conservatives and persons with significant authority are more likely to stay after the election. However, the greater the scope of your responsibility, the less ideology matters.
also include controls for whether a respondent works in an agency central to President Trump’s agenda. To determine agencies central to Trump’s agenda, one of the authors worked with two research assistants to code agencies that carry out policies mentioned in the Trump Campaign’s *Contract with the American Voter*. The document—released by Trump Campaign in October of 2016—laid out the President’s agenda for his first 100 days. So, for example, the document mentions a hiring freeze and immigration, so we code all respondents working in the Office of Personnel Management (hiring freeze) and the Department of Homeland Security (immigration enforcement) with a 1. Across agencies, 64% are responsible for implementing some component of President Trump’s agenda. In the cases where coders disagreed, they discussed coding with one of the authors and came to a resolution. Some policies, like the hiring freeze, involve most all agencies. In such cases, we code only the agencies most central to stated policy. All agencies coded as priorities are listed in supplementary appendix. Given that large agencies are also priority agencies and positions in large agencies may be more important than those in small agencies, we also control for agency employment (in thousands). The variable is skewed and so we use a logarithmic transformation of the variable.

Insulated agencies are less vulnerable to presidential control and their leaders subject to less direct pressure from the administration because of limits on the presidents’ ability to appoint and remove agency leaders in insulated agencies. Accordingly, we also consider whether turnover is less frequent in agencies structurally insulated from the president. We account for structural differences among agencies with indicators for executive departments (0, 1; 69%) and independent commissions (0, 1; 11%). The base category is agencies outside the executive departments that are not commissions (e.g., Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration). Our expectation is that career executives in independent commissions will depart at lower rates than executives in less insulated agencies.

We also control for individual factors that are likely to affect departure, including the career managers’ salary, eligibility for retirement, years of experience, and age. The survey asked respondents to report their salary as one of 26 bins ($10,000 per bin), but only seven are relevant for the SES (12–18 or $130,000–$199,000). Our expectation is that the probability of departure will increase with lower salaries, assuming that outside market opportunities are available. Indeed, in the survey data, 36% reveal that they have been approached about a job in the private sector in the previous year. Higher salaries should induce executives to stay in government. We determine retirement eligibility with data from the survey. The survey asked respondents “Are you now or will you become eligible to retire in the next 12 months” (yes—48.3%, no—50.3%, don’t know—1.3%). Eligibility for retirement should increase departure probabilities because it increases the value of outside options. Finally, most studies of departure find a nonlinear relationship between experience and departure rates and age and departure rates. Specifically, age and experience are initially negatively correlated with departure but eventually switch to being positively related to departure as age and experience increases. To account for nonlinearity, we include a squared term of experience and age in the models below.

**Methods**

To evaluate departure rates before and after the 2016 election, we estimate probit models with duration indicators to account for the time dependence in the observations. Given the nonindependence of observations by person, we cluster errors by individual.

**Results**

In table 2, we include model estimates from fully specified probit models of departure. Model 1 is a control-only model. Model 2 is the baseline model, whereas Models 3 and 4 include other measures of ideology. Importantly, the results provide suggestive evidence for H1 and support for H2 and H3. The conditional probability of departure increases after the election for executives in choke point positions and liberal executives.

**Choke Points**

Results provide suggestive evidence that individuals in high responsibility positions are more likely...
to depart than those in low responsibility positions (H1). The coefficient estimates for the post-election period are consistently positive across models and estimated modestly precisely, significant at the 0.05 or 0.10 level in one-tailed tests (Table 2). Although one-tailed tests are appropriate for directional hypotheses, we note that some caution should be taken in rejecting the null hypothesis. Substantively, the estimates suggest that the executives with the greatest scope of responsibilities (i.e., “choke point” positions) are more likely to depart than executives with the narrowest scope.

Figure 1 compares the departure probability of executives who answered “Yes” to three or fewer of 168

Table 2. Models of Career SES Departure, March 2015 to July 2017

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Post-Election Change</th>
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<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
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<td>0.054</td>
<td>-0.173*</td>
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<td>Party (D-R)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.173**</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency ideology (L-C)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.226**</td>
<td>0.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.352**</td>
<td>-0.374**</td>
<td>-0.329**</td>
<td>-0.418**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.144</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td>0.142</td>
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<td>#Responsibilities</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party (D-R)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>0.112**</td>
<td>0.052</td>
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<td>Years in federal government</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>-0.383**</td>
<td>-0.385**</td>
<td>-0.437**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age2</td>
<td>0.171</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.192</td>
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<td>Number of individuals</td>
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<td>554</td>
<td>554</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$ (df 24, 28, 28, 28)</td>
<td>170.43**</td>
<td>153.81**</td>
<td>151.09**</td>
<td>163.25**</td>
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Note: Akaike information criterion = 1,888, 1,677, 1,670, 1,711. Psuedo-$R^2$ = 0.094, 0.094, 0.092, 0.095.
*Significant at the 0.10 level in two-tailed test. **Significant at the 0.05 level. Duration indicators omitted.
nine questions related to managerial responsibilities (e.g., setting agency priorities, determining budgets, etc.) to those executives with eight or more “Yes” answers (i.e., 10th versus 90th percentile). Notably, the estimates demonstrate an increase in departure probabilities for all career members of the SES during the election season. Elections, particularly after 8 years of one president, are an important career event (Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017). Although the estimates suggest higher departure rates for choke point positions generally, they particularly reveal higher departure probabilities after the election and after the inauguration. Persons serving in positions with a greater scope of responsibility are estimated to depart government at higher rates than those with a narrower scope. The cumulative departure probabilities for the first 6 months of the Trump administration based on bootstrapped predictions are 15% versus 5% for those in the 90th versus 10th percentile, respectively. This is evidence that those in key policymaking positions are more likely to depart government because of both targeting by the new administration and anticipation of a new administration assuming office.

Collectively, this is important suggestive evidence that new administrations may marginalize career executives or the anticipation of such a relationship may induce career executives to leave before a new administration takes office as predicted by H1. Model coefficients probably underestimate the importance of high responsibility positions throughout the government because the analysis is performed on the important positions the members of the SES occupy. These results are consistent with existing research that discusses a cycle of distrust between new administrations and careerists (Pfiffner 1987; Resh 2015).

**Ideology**

The most robust finding across all of the models and specifications is that liberals are more likely to depart government after the election, whereas conservatives are more likely to stay. In support of H2, the post-election coefficient estimates on ideology are consistently negative and estimated precisely, indicating that more conservative civil servants are less likely to depart. Figure 2 plots the monthly predicted probability of departure by ideology (table 2, Model 1). The baseline estimates suggest that conservatives may have been slightly more likely to leave at the end of the Obama administration before the election, but we cannot reject the null that ideology makes no difference before the election (H2). After the election, however, a clear split emerges in the departure probabilities of liberal and conservative members of the SES. Estimates suggest that cumulative departure probability over the first 6 months of the Trump administration is 15%
for liberals, compared with 6% for conservatives. Even with a relatively low monthly exit rate, conflict between the preferences of a new administration and a career executive substantially increases the probability of departure. This is important evidence that career executives’ own ideology is an important component of their departure choices. Ideological conflict may make them more likely to be targeted and influences satisfaction with their job as a new administration comes into office.

To enhance confidence in this finding, Model 3 includes party affiliation rather than ideology as an independent variable. The effect of party on departures is consistent with the findings for ideology providing additional support for H2. Indeed, Democrats are more likely to leave than Republicans. The departure probability in any given month after the election varies from 0.05% to 4% and a two-unit change in the five-point party self-identification (e.g., from lean Democrat to lean Republican) decreases the monthly departure probability by 1.6 percentage points.

Strategic Exit

The third hypothesis suggested that a civil servant is more likely to strategically exit in the months before a presidential transition if she anticipates conflict with the new president. The estimates indicate that liberals are estimated to depart at a higher rate in the period after the election and before the inauguration. This suggests that once the outcome of the election was known some liberals anticipated conditions under the Trump administration and preferred to depart rather than remain through the transition.

It is possible that actions taken by the Trump transition team provided liberals with information about likely targets of the new administration. President Trump’s transition team actively sought the names of bureaucrats responsible for the implementation of particular policies, such as climate change. The transition team also amassed beachhead teams to enter and attempt to take control of agencies on inauguration day (Shaw and Kravitz 2017). Even when agencies rebuffed the transition teams’ efforts to obtain lists of names, their efforts may have been a signal to some civil servants that she can expect marginalization under the new administration (Shepardson 2017).30

One striking finding in all of the models and figures is that the probability of departure is higher for all civil servants in the several months before the election compared to after. Furthermore, departures during this period are unaffected by individual ideology. In the case of the 2016 election, most polls predicted that the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, would win the election (Katz 2017). During the pre-election period, conservatives could have anticipated this outcome and then left government in expectation of a Clinton presidency, but evidence that they did so is limited. Although the estimates reveal that

30 Another explanation for the results is the timing of the survey relative to the election. The SFGS went in the field 6 years into the Obama administration. Anyone with divergent preferences that remained could probably tolerate another Democratic administration.
career professionals in conservative agencies departed at higher rates (Model 4), we cannot reject the null that individual ideology had no influence on departure before the election.

This indicates that the end of a president’s term may serve as a natural break point where civil servants assess outside options and many leave government (Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017). Regardless of the outcome of an election, most agency leaders depart with the outgoing administration. Civil servants who remain in the agency will necessarily have to adapt to the new president’s agenda and re-establish working relationships with the new leadership teams in their agency. An incoming administration will endeavor to make their mark on agency policymaking, and individuals in key policymaking positions may expect scrutiny even if the incoming president is a co-partisan. Some civil servants may determine that they prefer to exit rather than remain through a transition.

Controls
Among the model controls, a number of interesting results emerge. First, the structure of agencies has very little influence on the departure rates of career executives. Although the coefficient estimate on regulatory commissions is large and negative, it is not estimated very precisely. Given the large number of vacancies on the commissions and the president’s increased power since the 1950s to select chairs, the degree of insulation from the president in commissions may be less than in the past (Devins and Lewis 2008). Indeed, changes in the membership on the Federal Communications Commission led to immediate changes in net neutrality policy. While executives in conservative agencies were more likely to leave before the election and less likely to depart after the election, executives in larger agencies were no more likely to depart than those in smaller agencies. As expected, those executives eligible to retire are estimated to have monthly departure probabilities about twice those of other executives. Age and more experience increases likeliness of staying, but this effect reverses as age rises. Interestingly, there is no consistent effect of individual salary. Higher paid employees are estimated to stay longer, but the estimates are not precise, arguably because pay is determined by specific markets and occupations.

Discussion and Conclusion
To effectively control the machinery of public policy, presidents need to control the key positions inside agencies. One of the most direct means of securing control is embedding personnel in those positions who are sympathetic to the president’s agenda. This happens at the top levels when presidents name new appointees to agency positions. This also happens at lower levels when appointees make decisions about which civil servants they can work with and who might be better suited for another position. The evidence presented here suggests that presidents have substantial influence over key positions in the civil service both because of their own efforts to remove career executives and because career executives depart willingly, starting during the election season and continuing after the election. Future research could extend this study by interviewing respondents about their experience during the transition to better understand tools used by presidents to encourage departures.

After the election and prior to the President Trump’s inauguration, liberal career executives were more likely to exit their positions in anticipation of conflict with the incoming administration and their anticipatory exit opened up positions without the new administration having to actively sideline troublesome individuals. This highlights an underappreciated second face of presidential power. Even the threat of difficulty may induce career civil servants to leave and open up opportunities for presidential leadership. Presidents may not have to act to get their way.

Our analysis is limited to a single as well as unusual transition raising questions about the generalizability of the results to other transitions. Existing research demonstrates that under the four previous presidents the average departure rate of members of the SES in the year following a transition is 9.6% (Bolton, de Figueiredo, and Lewis 2017). Comparatively, the departure rate of SES members in our sample after only 6 months is nearly 7%. However, we do not expect that the incentive to drive ideologically distant bureaucrats from key positions will vary substantially across administrations. In fact, there are reasons to believe that the Trump administration may be less effective in identifying and marginalizing career executives out of step with the administration’s agenda. Presidents rely on appointees in agencies to identify and target career executives for marginalization, but the Trump administration lags far behind previous presidential administrations in filling appointed positions. Although the volume of departures may be greater under the Trump administration, we expect that career executives are more likely to remain in their position when a like-minded president is elected.

Of course, not all of this shuffling and reshuffling has a political component but some of it does. Exit by both liberals and conservatives was more likely in the months preceding the election, suggesting that a presidential transition is a break point where civil servants evaluate outside

31 See the White House Transition Project: http://www.whitehousetransitionproject.org/appointments/.
options and some decide to pursue other opportunities. Regardless of the reason for departure, new presidents are given opportunities control policymaking. Without these opportunities, presidential efforts to spur new policymaking or reconfigure ongoing efforts would be more difficult. New presidents inherit an active policymaking apparatus that will continue working and churning out policy decisions whether presidents give agencies direction or not. Personnel, particularly “choke point”-type personnel, are the primary means by which presidents may stimulate or arrest government policymaking, which makes control of these positions vital for any presidential administration.

**Supplementary material**

Supplementary data are available at *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Appendix A. Step-by-Step Details of Data Collection**

We use survey data to identify a sample of career SES officials and their beliefs, and then we match survey data to personnel records to track departures over time. The 2014 Survey on the Future of Government Service conducted by David Lewis and Mark Richardson at Vanderbilt University helps us identify key figures by specifically including all career members of the SES in the sample to be surveyed. The survey was fielded between August and December 2014 and included questions that allow us to identify choke point positions as well as the ideology of officials filling these positions. In total, 1,374 career members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) responded to the survey.

Connecting Survey Respondents to Data on Careers

To determine which career executives left public service in the period before and after the 2016 election, we use data from the OPM and the *Federal Yellow Book* (a directory of government officials published quarterly). These two sources allow us to identify which survey respondents remained in government. In 2016, OPM released data on federal employees by name and quarter from 1973 to September of 2016 (Singer-Vine and Jeremy 2017). To trace exits after September 2016, we matched survey respondents to the online version of the *Federal Yellow Book*. This resource provides contact and background information on all high-level federal officials, including their appointment authority (e.g., Senate-confirmed appointee, member of the SES, etc.).

We replicated the sampling procedure that Richardson and Lewis used to generate the 2014 sample for the SFGS and downloaded data each month beginning shortly after the election of President Trump. When employees are no longer listed in the OPM data or *Federal Yellow Book* data, we assume that they have departed government. Departure is verified by checking names against subsequent draws of the *Federal Yellow Book*.

We successfully matched 936 of the 1,374 survey respondents to 2014 OPM personnel records (the period of the survey). We were unable to match survey respondents to personnel records in cases where OPM does not report these records (e.g., U.S. Postal Service, Federal Reserve, Central Intelligence Agency), where records were redacted (i.e., Department of Defense), or in cases where persons with identical names work in the same agency. After some cleaning, we started with 923 survey respondents and their OPM personnel records in 2014.

The study begins in March 2015 because the survey was in the field until December 2014 and the OPM data are quarterly. As of March 2015, there were 885 cases, down from 923. There were 20 people who left government during the period of the survey, and there were 18 persons in our survey who were not listed in the March 2015 personnel data. We exclude these cases.

Of the 885 executives in government in March 2015, 61 had subsequent breaks in service (but not clear departures). It is impossible to tell whether the breaks were errors in the BuzzFeed or *Federal Yellow Book* data or executives departed and returned. There are also three persons who look as if they departed

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33 We downloaded data on all members of the Senior Executive Service in all months during between November 21, 2016 and July 21, 2017 except December 2016.

34 In cases where someone looks as if they departed but appears again later, we exclude these cases from the main analysis.

35 Matching procedure reporting in supplementary appendix.

36 Thirteen individuals were incorrectly listed as being in the SES in the survey because they were serving in an acting role in a position previously held by a member of the SES.
in the Federal Yellow Book but their absence from the directory appears to be an error. We exclude these cases and begin with a sample of 821 executives and 275 departures.

References


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Shaw, Al, and Derek Kravitz. 2017. Here are more than 1,000 officials Trump has quietly deployed across the government. *ProPublica*, March 8.