

# Bureaucracy Bashing and Perceptions of Public Employees

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**I**n popular fiction and the news media, the words “government” and “bureaucracy” are often used interchangeably to describe the administrative state. However, these terms carry distinct positive and negative connotations, which we argue have diverging second-order effects on how citizens view public employees of the administrative state. Indeed, the term “bureaucracy” has a pejorative etymology, dating back to the eighteenth century when it was first used to disparage governments managed by unelected administrators and desk jockeys. Based on the term’s history, we hypothesize that bureaucratic depictions of public employees should negatively affect survey respondents’ perceptions of their trustworthiness and competence. We test this hypothesis with two separate equivalence framing experiments and find that describing public employees as either “bureaucrats” or “government bureaucrats” instead of “government employees” leads respondents to view them as significantly less trustworthy and more corrupt. We further examine our results for heterogeneous treatment effects across several key political predispositions and find that respondents who are low in social dominance orientation (SDO) are more likely to change their attitudes toward public employees in response to bureaucratic depictions. We provide additional empirical evidence that respondents associate bureaucracies with inflexibility, hierarchy, and reinforcement of the status quo, which we speculate is the mechanism that leads individuals who are low in SDO to perceive bureaucrats more negatively.

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“We have an illness in France which bids fair to play havoc with us; this illness is called bureaumania.” (Jacques Claude Marie Vincent de Gournay)

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“But we no longer have government ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people.’ We have government of the bureaucrats, by the consultants, and for the special interests. We have a system that is designed to bypass us, the American people.” (Newt Gingrich)

“Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past the time when the quo has lost its status.” (Lawrence J. Peter)

## INTRODUCTION

### Declining Trust in Government

**A**mericans’ trust in government institutions has declined precipitously over the last half century (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Levi and Laura 2000; Hetherington 1998, 2005; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Lerman 2019). This downward trend has sparked renewed scholarly interest in the sources and effects of the public’s trust in government, with recent research highlighting numerous contributing factors, including growing partisan polarization (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Jones 2015; Robison and Mullinix 2016; Theiss-Morse et al. 2015; Lerman 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019), increasingly negative media coverage of political campaigns and government scandals (Aalberg et al. 2012; Geer 2012; Mettler a), dissatisfaction with changes in government policy and government services (Miller, Arthur H. 1974; Norris 2014; Tyler and Jackson 2014), generational turnover (Dalton and Shin 2014), and even variation in genetically inherited baseline trust levels (Ojeda 2016; Mondak et al. 2017).

However, while this past work has uncovered a host of important social factors and individual differences that predict trust in government institutions, our study is one of the first to examine how the *language* used to describe government employees affects citizens’ perceptions of their trustworthiness and competence. Specifically, we argue that the term “bureaucracy”—often used by scholars and pundits alike to describe large-scale government programs and the state apparatus more generally—has a uniquely pejorative connotation, which primes negative stereotypes of public employees in citizens’ minds as disinterested, corrupt, and unresponsive to regular people. Thus, when political commentators use the term bureaucracy to describe parts of the government, they (often intentionally) make the audience more likely to view public employees with distrust—and sometimes even with disdain.

Using two online survey experiments with samples of 1,115 and 2,050 adult US residents, respectively, we find strong evidence that describing employees of the administrative state as “bureaucrats”/“government bureaucrats” rather than “government employees” leads survey respondents to rate them as significantly less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less likely to serve the public interest.

Our finding that trust in public employees can be altered by a mere change in language has important scholarly and real-world implications and builds on the growing literature on the role that trust in public institutions plays in citizens’ satisfaction with Democracy (Graham and Svobik 2020) and general social trust (Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). Our findings also contribute to the growing literature in public administration investigating the sociological and economic factors that shape views of public institutions (e.g.,

Bellodi 2022; Yackee and Lowery 2005; Lee and Van Ryzin 2020), and the extent to which perceptions of the quality of public services influence citizens' political views (e.g., Woodhouse et al. 2022; Cremaschi et al. 2022).

## Study Purpose and Organization

For the purpose of developing and testing our argument about the importance of language in influencing perceptions of the administrative state, we first present our theoretical framework. It builds upon the pejorative history and connotation of the term bureaucracy and is grounded in the literature on message framing in political science. We then describe the results of two framing experiments that examine whether bureaucratic depictions of public employees affect citizens' perceptions of their trustworthiness and competence. Across both surveys, we find that describing public employees as bureaucrats leads respondents to view them as significantly less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less likely to serve the public interest.

Following an analysis of the main treatment effects of our two framing experiments, we test for heterogeneous treatment effects across several key measures of political predispositions, including partisan and ideological identification and measures of anti-egalitarian values in the form of social dominance orientation (SDO).

We do not find an interaction between partisanship and ideology and our bureaucracy framing—which indicates that the term's negative connotation transcends political camps—but we do find a significant interaction with SDO, such that individuals who are *low* in SDO (i.e., those who reject group-based hierarchies in society) are more likely to negatively evaluate public employees

when they are described as bureaucrats instead of government employees. We speculate that this is because the term “bureaucracy” conveys an image of government administration that is hierarchical, domineering, and unresponsive to the needs of citizens (especially marginalized groups) (cf. Gaikwad and Nellis 2021; Nisar 2018; Herd and Moynihan 2019). These negative characteristics of bureaucracies lead individuals who oppose social hierarchies to perceive public employees as having anti-egalitarian motives when they are described as bureaucrats. We conclude the paper with a discussion of our findings and their implications.

## THEORY

### Origins of the Term “Bureaucracy”

The pejorative meaning of the term bureaucracy can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when French economist Jacques Claude Marie Vincent de Gournay created the label to disparage the French administrative state, which he believed was slowly subsuming the powers of the government under the management of unelected administrators (Crooks and Parsons 2016, 15–16). De Gournay, an economist, also bemoaned the ever multiplying rules regulating trade and commerce—rules which were often created and subsequently managed by unelected branches of the administrative state. To capture his disdain, De Gournay coined the term bureaucracy, a pithy portmanteau combining the French word for “writing desk” with the Greek word for “government.”

Of course, the term bureaucracy is also used by scholars of public administration within a broader formalized typology of public administrative sys-

tems. The German sociologist Max Weber was one of the first to embrace the term, arguing that bureaucratic forms of administration are in many respects *the most* rational, fair, and efficient form of government organization, due to their reliance on formal rules, technical competence, and focus on maximizing social and economic outcomes (Crooks and Parsons 2016; Weber 1978).<sup>1</sup> According to Weber, the “ideal” bureaucracy is characterized by strict adherence to formalized rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures, as well as an impersonal, hierarchical division of labor determined by technical competence and meritocratic hiring (Charasz and Vogler 2021; Vogler 2019, 2023). Despite Weber’s contention that bureaucracy is often more efficient than other forms of public administration (e.g., direct democracy and monarchy), he recognized that bureaucracies also have the potential to severely limit individual freedoms, trapping citizens in what he referred to as an “iron cage” of rationality. Thus, even according to Weber, bureaucracy has a dark side.

### “Bureaucracy” Bashing

We argue that most people do not share Weber’s positive views on bureaucracies. In contemporary American society, political elites and the media often portray the government as a bureaucracy in order to *disparage* particular departments, agencies, and programs, and to generally cast the

<sup>1</sup>Note that it is debated among scholars of public administration whether Weber viewed bureaucracies as “efficient.” Some argue that rationality and efficiency are distinct characteristics and that Weber primarily associated the first of these with bureaucracy (e.g., Gajduschek 2003).

government in a negative light (Garrett et al. 2006). For example, during Donald Trump’s presidency, prominent right-wing politicians and media personalities frequently depicted the government as a bureaucratic “deep state,” run by unelected, highly educated liberal elites, who actively sought to undermine Donald Trump’s presidency—and by extension, the democratic will of the American people (cf. Chaffetz 2018; Lofgren 2016).

In the public administration literature, these kinds of negative portrayals of the administrative state are commonly referred to as “bureaucracy bashing.” Past work in this field has found that citizens are highly receptive to bureaucratic depictions of the administrative state, leading to poorer evaluations of the (perceived) competence of government agencies (Caillier 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, research suggests that messages broadcast by the media and political elites have a measurable impact on levels of trust in government institutions and beliefs about the quality of public services (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997; McCombs and Valenzuela 2020). Other work finds that negative portrayals of the government adversely affect government employees’ morale and ability to perform their jobs (Garrett et al. 2006), contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy of government dysfunction (cf. Lerman 2019).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>While skepticism of the state is not as strong in most other advanced democracies, negative views of public bureaucracy are fairly common: In many other countries, too, bureaucracy is typically thought of as representing “what is wrong with the country” (Peters 2018, 29).

<sup>3</sup>This prophecy is self-fulfilling because negative portrayals of and attitudes toward the administrative state lead to cuts in funding and citizens opting out of public programs, which leads to further deterioration in qual-

However, few studies have empirically tested whether describing the administrative state as a bureaucracy affects citizens' perceptions of the trustworthiness, corruption, and motives of public employees. Given the prevalence of bureaucratic depictions of government in contemporary American politics, as well as the pejorative origins of the term bureaucracy, we expect that describing government employees as bureaucrats will cause people to view government workers as less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less responsive to the needs and interests of citizens. This prediction leads to the following three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Statements that refer to employees of the administrative state as “bureaucrats” or “government bureaucrats” will lead respondents to view them as less trustworthy, on average, than when they are described as “government employees.”

**Hypothesis 2:** Statements that refer to employees of the administrative state as “bureaucrats” or “government bureaucrats” will lead respondents to view them as more corrupt, on average, than when they are described as “government employees.”

**Hypothesis 3:** Statements that refer to employees of the administrative state as “bureaucrats” or “government bureaucrats” will lead respondents to view them as less responsive to the needs of citizens (in terms of serving the public and other positive attributes), on average, than when they are described as “government employees.”

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ity of services provided and confirms existing negative views.

## Bureaucracy Bashing as a Form of Equivalence Framing

For the present study, we conceptualize bureaucratic portrayals of public employees as a form of *equivalence framing*. In the political science literature, message framing is typically categorized as either equivalence or emphasis framing based on the type of information manipulated in the frames (Scheufele and Iyengar 2014). Equivalence framing entails rephrasing substantively equivalent statements or facts in a way that primes negative or positive considerations of the object being described (Cacciatore et al. 2015). For instance, describing the economy as being at “ninety five percent employment” instead of “five percent unemployment” might lead people to report greater confidence in the state of the economy. Both statements present mathematically identical facts, but the phrasing of that fact differs so as to depict employment as a gain (in the case of the former) or a loss (in the case of the latter).

Emphasis framing entails rewriting messages to include or exclude different *substantive, subjective considerations*, such as highlighting different moral considerations that may be relevant to deciding whether to support or oppose a policy. For instance, when asking survey respondents whether a hate group should be allowed to hold a rally on a public university campus, describing the rally as a matter of protecting first amendment rights rather than a matter of public safety makes respondents more likely to say they would allow the rally to take place (Druckman 2001).

In the case of our bureaucracy framing, our treatment entails presenting respondents with one of two analogous descriptions of employees of the administrative state: specifically, as either “gov-

ernment employees” or “bureaucrats”/“government bureaucrats.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, from our perspective, our framing treatment is a form of equivalence framing. In order to ensure that citizens understand that our questions refer to government bureaucrats rather than bureaucrats working for non-government entities, we explicitly told respondents in our second survey that “The next set of questions are about the government and people who work for the government, including employees at the local, state, and federal levels.” Additionally, in the second survey we also introduced the new treatment category of “government bureaucrat” to assess if people may evaluate the term “bureaucrat” differently due to potential association with the private sector. As we show in detail below, we did not find meaningful differences between our two bureaucrat/government bureaucrat treatment conditions, indicating that our equivalency framing of public employees is not confounded by a misunderstanding of bureaucrats as non-government actors. Given the identical definition of public employees across both treatments, any difference in results across the treatment groups should be reducible to variation in the language used to describe them.

Our framing manipulation is designed to (1) reflect how public employees and the administrative state are described by political commentators and the media more broadly and (2) isolate the effect of our language manipulation—holding all else constant—on trust in public employees while ensuring that respondents have the same substantive understanding of what we mean by

<sup>4</sup>In the first survey, we used the term “bureaucrat.” In the second survey, we used both the terms “bureaucrat” and “government bureaucrat,” and we find that the responses to these two terms are nearly identical.

government employees/bureaucrats.

## DATA AND METHODS

Our empirical analysis is based on two online survey experiments conducted in the US among adult citizens currently residing in the country. The first survey had a sample of 1,115 respondents and was fielded through the survey provider Qualtrics in November of 2020. The second survey had a slightly larger sample of 2,050 respondents and was carried out by YouGov in July and August 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The first and second survey employed a similar experimental design but also differed in several respects. Specifically, our second survey experiment sought to extend our initial results with an additional framing condition and a broader range of questions testing the effect of bureaucratic depictions on attitudes toward public institutions and employees.

**First Survey** The first survey was conducted online through the survey firm Qualtrics and financed by the Institute for Humane Studies. The sample was restricted to adult (18+) resident citizens of the US. Respondents were recruited from the Qualtrics online survey panel. Because the survey was conducted online with a non-probability sample, we used quotas to attempt to match the demographic characteristics of our sample to those

<sup>5</sup>Importantly, this means that our data come from two different presidencies (the Trump presidency and the Biden presidency). If we observe comparable results across these time periods, it means that the observed dynamics do not depend on the party that is in charge of the executive branch.

of the general US population (based on the most recent figures from the US Census). The quotas are described in Table 1. We conduct the analysis of the first dataset without additional weighting.

At the beginning of the survey, respondents first answered several demographic questions, followed by a series of questions measuring their political and ideological beliefs. Respondents then answered several blocks of questions about their perceptions of government agencies and employees. In order to directly test the effect of bureaucratic depictions of government administration on respondents' perceptions of public employees, we randomly varied the labels used to describe public employees in questions asking about their trustworthiness, corruption, and motives. Thus, in the first survey, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two framing conditions that varied how public employees/agencies were described (but which used the same labels consistently throughout the survey). Half of the sample was assigned to answer questions that described public employees as "government employees" and government institutions as "government agencies"; the other half of the sample was assigned to answer questions where public employees were described as "bureaucrats" and government institutions as "bureaucracies." For example, the question measuring trust in public employees was worded "how much do you trust or distrust government employees/bureaucrats?".

We measured the effect of our bureaucracy framing with three key outcomes: (1) *trust in employees of the administrative state*, (2) *perceptions of corruption among employees of the administrative state*, and (3) *perceptions that administrative state employees seek to serve the public as a whole*.

To measure trust, we asked respondents how much they "trust or distrust government employees/bureaucrats," with the possible answer choices ranging from "highly distrust" to "highly trust" on a seven-point Likert scale. For analysis, we recoded responses to range from 0 (highly distrust) to 1 (highly trust). To measure perceptions of corruption, we asked respondents to rate the extent to which they believe corruption among "government employees/bureaucrats" is a problem. There were three possible answer choices: (1) "Corruption is a major problem," (2) "Corruption is a minor problem," and (3) "Corruption is not a problem." We recoded these responses to range from 0 (corruption is not a problem) to 1 (corruption is a major problem). Finally, to measure respondents' beliefs about whether government employees/bureaucrats serve the public as a whole, we asked respondents "What do you think primarily motivates most government employees/bureaucrats?", after which respondents could choose from a list of potential motives. If respondents selected "Serving the public as a whole" (the most positive/socially desirable goal of public employees included), we code it as a 1, and otherwise as 0. The answer choices also included statements such as "maintaining power differences between groups" and "following their own ideology/partisanship."

**TABLE 1. First Survey: Quotas (Target and Filled)**

	<b>Filled %</b>	<b>Target %</b>	<b>Filled #</b>	<b>Target #</b>
<b>Race Quotas:</b>				
Non-Hisp. White	64.93%	62.50%	724	625
Non-Hisp. Black	12.65%	12.50%	141	125
Hispanic	14.26%	17.00%	159	170
Asian	5.20%	5.00%	58	50
Other Races	3.59%	3.00%	40	30
<b>Gender Quotas:</b>				
Male	40.63%	48.00%	453	520
Female	58.92%	52.00%	657	480
<b>Age Quotas:</b>				
18-34	30.67%	30.00%	342	300
35-55	37.49%	33.00%	418	330
55+	31.66%	37.00%	353	370
<b>Education Quotas:</b>				
High School or Less	27.26%	40.00%	304	400
Some college/Assoc.	33.90%	28.00%	378	280
Bachelors or higher	38.83%	32.00%	433	320

Note: Table shows target and filled quotas for numbers of different demographic groups in the first survey. Four demographic categories were used for quotas: (1) race, (2) gender, (3) age, and (4) education. Target total was 1000, filled total was 1115. All numbers provided are after data cleaning by Qualtrics (the responsible survey firm).



**Second Survey** The second survey was conducted online through YouGov and sponsored by the Young Scholar Fund at the University of Konstanz. The target population for the survey was adult (18+) US citizens residing in the US. Respondents were recruited from opt-in survey panels managed by YouGov. We used quotas (calculated by YouGov based on ACS and Census data) to match the characteristics of the sample to the general US population Table 2. Similar to our first survey, we did not apply survey weights as we wanted to avoid any unintended distortions of our experimental results. (However, in the appendix we show that our results hold when applying survey weights.)

At the beginning of the second survey, respondents answered a series of questions about their personal experiences with public goods and services. They then answered several questions about their values and ideological beliefs, including several questions measuring social dominance orientation and ideological identification as liberal or conservative. Finally, respondents answered a series of questions about their trust in public employees and the extent to which they view them as corrupt.

In this second survey, we introduced a third condition to our framing manipulation, which described public employees as “government bureaucrats” in addition to our two original treatment conditions (from our first survey) describing public employees as either “bureaucrats” or “government employees.” We included this third condition to address the possibility that, to some respondents, “bureaucrats” may also represent non-government workers in corporate settings. Importantly, we find little difference in the effect of our two bureaucracy treatments, regardless of

whether public employees are described as “bureaucrats” or “government bureaucrats.” This suggests that the aforementioned concern is not a direct threat to our research design or substantive interpretation of our results.

Similar to our first survey experiment, we measured trust and perceptions of corruption of administrative state employees as our outcomes of interest. We made a minor change to the answer choices for our measure of perceived corruption, such that the number of answer choices increased from three to four. Specifically, the question asked respondents: “How corrupt are government employees/government bureaucrats/bureaucrats?” The answer choices were the following: (1) “very corrupt,” (2) “somewhat corrupt,” (3) “not very corrupt,” (4) “not at all corrupt.” In our analyses, we recoded responses to this question to range from 0 (not at all corrupt) to 1 (very corrupt).

To ensure respondents understood that our questions did not pertain to non-government workers and entities, respondents were informed in the second survey that the questions they would answer related specifically to the government and government employees.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to again testing for treatment effects on our key outcomes of trust and corruption, we also included several questions in the second survey that test potential mechanisms that might explain the heterogeneous effects we observed in our first survey. Specifically, we asked respondents to choose from a list of common stereotypes about administrative state employees. The list also included three key stereotypes (namely

<sup>6</sup>All respondents saw the following message: “The next set of questions are about the government and people who work for the government, including employees at the local, state, and federal levels.”

**TABLE 2. Second Survey: Quotas (Target and Filled)**

	<b>Filled %</b>	<b>Target %</b>	<b>Filled #</b>	<b>Target #</b>
<b>Race Quotas:</b>				
Black	11.82%	11.69%	289	269
Hispanic	14.23%	14.37%	348	331
All Other Races	73.95%	73.93%	1808	1701
<b>Gender Quotas:</b>				
Male	47.28%	48.51%	1156	1116
Female	52.72%	51.49%	1289	1185
<b>Age Quotas:</b>				
18-29	22.74%	22.04%	556	507
30-44	25.81%	26.10%	631	601
45-64	34.15%	34.70%	835	799
65+	17.30%	17.16%	423	395
<b>Education Quotas:</b>				
No HS, High school graduate	41.23%	43.31%	1008	997
Some college, 2-year	32.11%	30.99%	785	713
4-year	17.46%	16.54%	427	381
Post-grad	9.20%	9.15%	225	211

Note: Table shows target and filled quotas in the second survey. Four demographic categories were used for quotas: (1) race, (2) gender, (3) age, and (4) education. Target total was 2301, filled total was 2445. All numbers provided are prior to data cleaning by YouGov (the responsible survey firm).

“unresponsive,” “incompetent,” and “corrupt”) that we suspect are primed by bureaucratic depictions of government and thus lead respondents to view public employees more negatively when they are framed as bureaucrats. Additionally, we asked respondents to choose between a series of opposing binary statements that measured their beliefs about the social effects of the administrative state. In these binary statements, we also varied the language used to describe the administrative state as either “governments,” “government bureaucracies,” or “bureaucracies.”

With regard to this last measure, from a theoretical perspective, the most important question we focus on asked respondents to choose which of two statements they agree with most: that the institutions of the administrative state either (1) “create more burdens for people who are already at a disadvantage in society” or (2) “help and support people who are at a disadvantage in society.” Several additional binary questions asked respondents to choose between opposing characteristics they associate with the administration state, including whether government agencies (1) “interfere with our liberties” or “help us maintain our liberties”, (2) “have too much red tape” or “are easily accessible”, and (3) “perpetuate inequality in society” or “often work against inequality in society.” For each of these, we expect that framing the administrative state as a bureaucracy will lead respondents to select the more pejorative category on average.

## Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

To further scrutinize the results of our framing manipulation, we test for heterogeneous treatment

effects across several key measures of political and ideological predispositions, including (1) partisanship/party affiliation, (2) ideological identification, and (3) preferences for egalitarianism at the group level, measured with social dominance orientation (SDO).

The justification for the first two measures is straightforward: Bureaucracy bashing has been a prominent feature of conservative messaging since at least the 1980s, with Republican leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich frequently depicting the federal government as a bloated bureaucracy. Moreover, the principle of limited government has long been considered a key pillar of conservative ideology in the United States (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). It is therefore reasonable to suspect that our bureaucracy framing might resonate more strongly with conservative and Republican respondents—two related groups that could be especially predisposed to view “government bureaucrats” with distrust.

To measure partisanship in the first survey, we use a standard branched-choice question that asked respondents whether they identify more with the Republican party, the Democratic party, as an Independent, or with some “Other” party. Individuals who chose the Republican or Democratic party answered a follow-up question that asked whether they identify as a “strong” or “not very strong” Democrat/Republican. Respondents who did not choose either of the two parties in the first question answered a separate follow-up question that asked which party they would feel closer to if they had to choose, with individuals who chose either the Democratic or Republican party coded as “leaners”, and individuals who did not choose either of the two parties coded as Independents. We combine responses to these

questions into a seven-point scale, such that 1 = “strong Democrat”, 2 = “weak Democrat”, 3 = “lean Democrat”, 4 = “independent/other”, 5 = “lean Republican”, 6 = “weak Republican”, and 7 = “strong Republican.” The seven-item scale was then rescaled to range from 0 (strong Democrat) to 1 (strong Republican). In the second survey, we used simple party identification as a categorical variable with independents and Democrats contrasted with Republicans as the baseline category.

To measure ideological identification in the first survey, respondents answered a question asking “when it comes to politics, where would you place yourself on the following scale?”, with seven response options ranging from “extremely liberal” at one end, to “moderate” in the middle, to “extremely conservative” at the other end. Responses were rescaled to range from 0 (extremely liberal) to 1 (extremely conservative). In the second survey, we asked respondents the following question: “In politics, people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 6 means the right?” The answer options ranged from “0 - Left” to “6 - Right” (with only these two outer points having labels attached). Responses were rescaled to range from 0 (left) to 1 (right).

As a third potential moderating factor, we look at the interaction between our bureaucracy framing and SDO. Because bureaucracies are often described as hierarchical, impersonal, domineering, and unresponsive to the needs of citizens (especially marginalized groups) (cf. Gaikwad and Nellis 2021; Nisar 2018; Herd and Moynihan 2019),<sup>7</sup> we hypothesize that our bureaucracy

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, research in public administration finds that bureaucratic forms of administration do often cre-

framing may resonate more strongly with individuals who score highly on measures of SDO. SDO is defined as a dispositional preference for social hierarchies and the domination of low-status groups in society (Sidanius et al. 2001, 2017). Our reasoning is once again straightforward. Because bureaucracies are viewed as hierarchical and inflexible (and thus as creating and maintaining inequalities between groups), we propose that individuals who favor hierarchical social arrangements (i.e., those who are high in SDO) should also view bureaucracies *more favorably* than those who are low in SDO.

Past work has found that high-SDO individuals tend to be more supportive of affirmative action programs when they believe these policies will only lead to racial minorities being hired to *low-status* positions within organizations (Ho and Unzueta 2015). It is thus reasonable to suspect that high-SDO individuals will view public employees *more favorably* when they are described as bureaucrats, since bureaucrats are generally seen as the primary agents enforcing the rules and regulations that make bureaucracies inefficient and corrupt, and that reinforce rather than ameliorate inequalities between groups in society.

To measure SDO, we asked respondents a set of three questions tapping preferences for group domination and inequality prior to answering questions about perceptions of administrative state employees. These items are drawn from the SDO-7 measure of social dominance orientation, which captures beliefs about the desirability and ate greater “administrative burdens” for members of disadvantaged groups in society (Adam et al. 2021; Assouline et al. 2022; Hemker and Rink 2017; Pedersen et al. 2018; Pedraza et al. 2017; Schram et al. 2009; Spirig 2023; White et al. 2015; Mettler b)

legitimacy of intergroup domination in society (e.g., “some groups are simply inferior to other groups”). This dimension of SDO is labeled *SDO-Dominance*, and it is defined as “a preference for systems of group-based dominance in which high-status groups forcefully oppress lower status groups” (Ho and Unzueta 2015). We code each question such that higher scores indicate greater support for group domination and inequality. We then averaged together the questions and recoded the variable to range from 0 (low SDO) to 1 (high SDO).

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we examine the effect of our bureaucracy framing on respondents’ perceptions of public employees’ trustworthiness and motives across treatment conditions. We expect to see that our bureaucracy manipulation leads respondents to view government workers as less trustworthy, competent, and responsive to the public, and significantly more inegalitarian in their motives. Next, we test for heterogeneous treatment effects across ideology, partisan identity, and SDO.

## RESULTS: FIRST SURVEY

In this section, we present the results of our first experiment. We begin by examining the impact of our main experimental manipulation (a change in the wording describing public employees) on all key outcome variables via differences in average evaluations of public employees across conditions. Then, we examine the interaction of our treatment with key political predispositions, including ideology, partisanship, and social dominance orientation. The section concludes with a summary of our findings.

## First Study: Main Effects

Our primary experimental manipulation in the first survey entailed a change in question wording such that public employees were described as either “government employees” or “bureaucrats.” We find strong results that comport with our hypotheses. The first row of Figure 1 depicts the average effects of our bureaucrat framing on respondents’ perceptions of public employees across our key outcome variables. Respondents view public employees as significantly less trustworthy and more corrupt in the bureaucrat framing condition.

Moreover, as we show in Figure 2, we also find that respondents are less likely to view public employees as “serving the public” and are more likely to view them as being motivated to “maintain power differences between groups” when they are described as bureaucrats.

Because bureaucracy bashing is more common among conservative political elites and pundits (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), we further test whether framing public employees as bureaucrats leads respondents to view them as more likely to “follow their own ideology/partisanship” and be more aligned with the Democratic party (also visualized in Figure 2). We find that respondents are significantly more likely to report that government employees “follow their own ideology” when they are labeled as bureaucrats. However, respondents appear no more likely to believe that government employees are aligned with the Democratic party in the “bureaucrat” compared to “government employee” condition. Overall, these results indicate that describing government employees as bureaucrats strongly affects respondents’ perceptions of their trustworthiness, corruption, and dedication to serving the public.

## First Study: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Next, we discuss the conditional impact of our bureaucrat framing when interacted with several common measures of political predispositions. The model results are shown in Table 3. As the table shows, there are few statistically significant interaction effects with either political ideology or partisan affiliation, with the exceptions of Independents on the measure of party ID. However, there is a consistent and statistically significant interaction with the measure of SDO across all our key outcomes.

We visualize the results of the interaction with SDO in the second row of Figure 1. The interaction is significant for all three of our outcomes, including trust in government employees, perceptions of corruption, and perceptions that public employees serve the public. SDO clearly moderates the impact of our bureaucracy framing on respondents' perceptions of public employees.

However, we observe an interesting dynamic. As Figure 1 illustrates, our interaction results with regard to SDO are not driven by high-SDO individuals but rather by those who are *low* in SDO. When public employees are described as bureaucrats, low-SDO individuals see them as less trustworthy and more corrupt.

This is likely because bureaucracies are often seen as hierarchical organizations that put marginalized groups at a disadvantage and maintain the status quo. All these features contradict the world views of low-SDO individuals.

Thus, although the heterogeneous effects we uncover are primarily driven by one subset of the population (only those who reject group-based hierarchies), we still believe they align with our

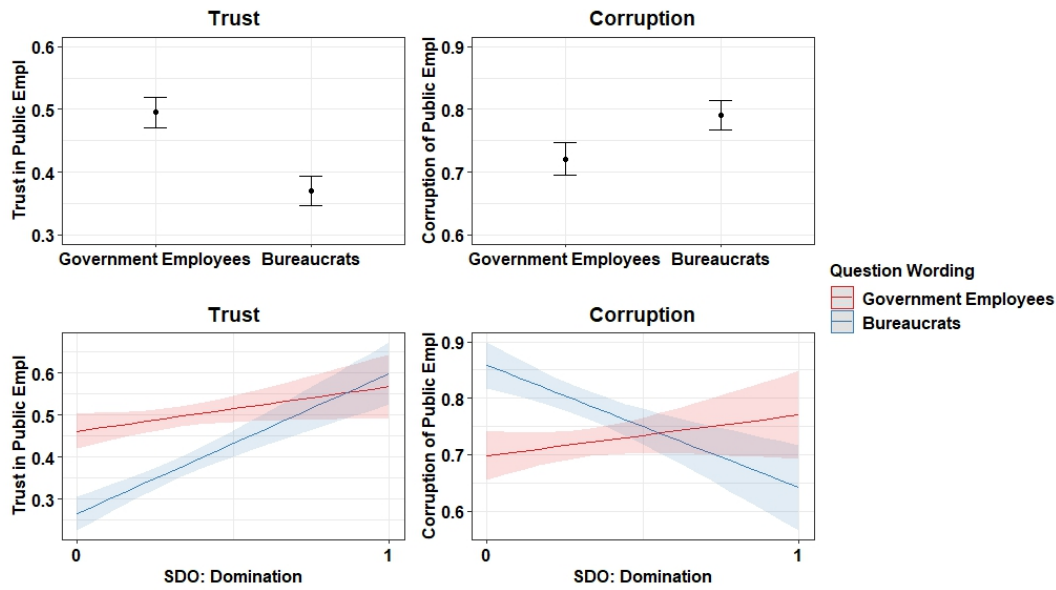
hypothesis that egalitarian predispositions should moderate the effect of bureaucratic depictions on trust, due to what we believe to be a conflict between egalitarian values and the widespread perception that the inflexible and domineering character of bureaucracies maintains social inequities and discriminates against low-status groups, as suggested by Herd and Moynihan (2019) and Nisar (2018) among others. For this reason, when public employees are depicted as “bureaucrats,” this framing evokes stronger reactions among those who reject social hierarchies, which manifests in lower levels of trust and higher perceived corruption.<sup>8</sup>

These results underscore the importance of taking into account preferences for intergroup domination and inequality (in this case, opposition to group inequality) when studying the effects of bureaucracy bashing on citizens' trust in government agencies and employees.

We *did not* find an interaction between SDO and our bureaucracy framing in predicting perceptions of government employees' motives (e.g., “maintaining power differences between groups in society”). This is likely because—as the results of our second survey illustrate in more detail—the perception that bureaucracies are inflexible and unresponsive to the needs of marginalized groups is a common stereotype, which is widely held by the public, including those both high and low in SDO. What differs is merely whether respondents view the anti-egalitarian characteristics of bureaucracies favorably or not.

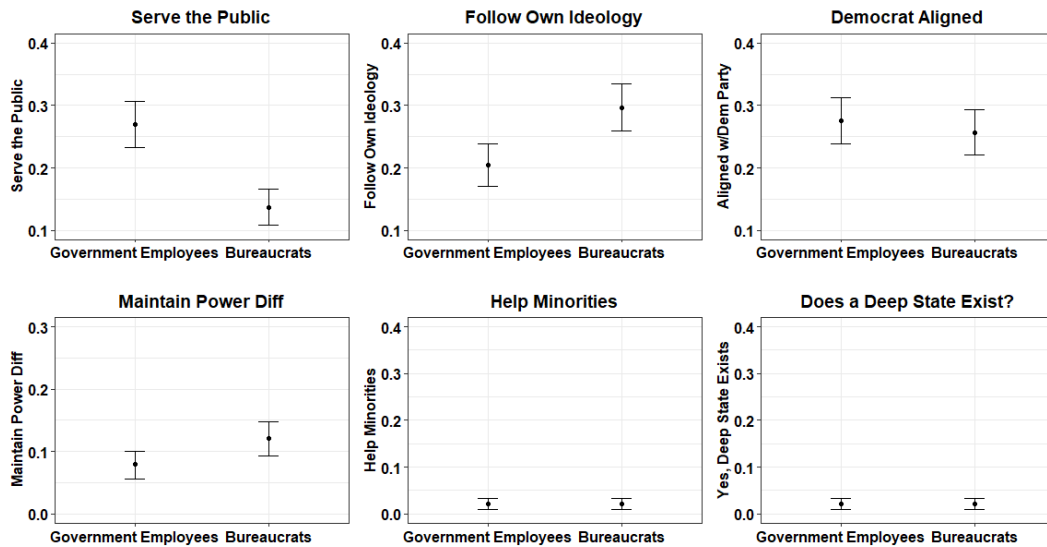
<sup>8</sup>We provide empirical evidence for these stereotypes as mechanisms in the analysis of the second survey.

**FIGURE 1. Survey 1: Key Results and Interactions (Perceptions of Public Employees)**



Description: The upper part of this figure shows average group means with respect to (1) trust in and (2) perceived corruption of public employees for both treatment categories (“government employees” vs. “bureaucrats”). The lower part shows heterogeneous effects for the same outcome variables at different levels of SDO. The detailed regression results upon which the lower part is based are contained in Table 3.

**FIGURE 2. Survey 1: Additional Results (Perceptions of Public Employees)**



Description: This figure shows average group means with respect to the perceived goals and other key characteristics of public employees for both treatment categories (“government employees” vs. “bureaucrats”). (These are simple group means comparisons that are not based on a regression. Thus, there is no associated regression table.)

**TABLE 3. First Survey: Heterogeneous Effects**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Trust <i>OLS</i>	Corr. <i>OLS</i>	S. Pub. <i>Logit</i>	Trust <i>OLS</i>	Corr. <i>OLS</i>	S. Pub. <i>Logit</i>	Trust <i>OLS</i>	Corr. <i>OLS</i>	S. Pub. <i>Logit</i>
	Interaction w. SDO			Interaction w. Ideology			Interaction w. Party ID		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Bur.	-0.493*** (0.133)	0.032 (0.045)	-0.638*** (0.198)	-0.754*** (0.107)	0.137*** (0.036)	-0.884*** (0.161)	-1.010*** (0.189)	0.218*** (0.064)	-1.010*** (0.279)
SDO	0.105* (0.055)	0.024 (0.019)	-0.110 (0.072)						
Bur.*SDO	0.228*** (0.076)	-0.096*** (0.026)	0.184 (0.113)						
Ideo.				0.044 (0.041)	0.008 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.052)			
Bur.*Ideo.				-0.001 (0.060)	0.004 (0.020)	0.115 (0.089)			
Democ.							-0.418** (0.173)	0.122** (0.059)	-0.047 (0.216)
Indep.							-1.037*** (0.202)	0.147** (0.069)	-0.628** (0.277)
Bur.*Dem.							0.303 (0.246)	-0.125 (0.084)	0.035 (0.365)
Bur.*Ind.							0.541* (0.282)	-0.104 (0.096)	0.699 (0.427)
Constant	0.087 (0.094)	1.468*** (0.032)	-1.123*** (0.127)	-0.037 (0.076)	1.441*** (0.025)	-1.000*** (0.096)	0.410*** (0.133)	1.353*** (0.045)	-0.845*** (0.166)
Obs.	1,114	1,109	1,113	1,114	1,109	1,113	1,114	1,109	1,113
R <sup>2</sup>	0.080	0.029		0.045	0.014		0.071	0.019	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.078	0.027		0.042	0.012		0.067	0.015	

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01  
Table shows regression analyses that are meant to identify possible heterogeneous treatment effects of our bureaucracy framing. Three variables are used for interaction terms: (1) SDO, (2) political ideology, and (3) party ID. Results in regressions 1 and 2 show a consistent and significant interaction with SDO. At the same time, regressions 4–9 do not show consistently significant interaction terms with the other two concepts.



## RESULTS: SECOND SURVEY

In this section, we present the results of our second survey. We again begin by examining the impact of our main experimental treatment on our outcomes of interest. Importantly, we add a third treatment condition in the second survey, such that public employees are described as “government bureaucrats” in addition to the two conditions describing them as either “bureaucrats” or “government employees.” As with the first survey, we also examine our results for heterogeneous treatment effects across three common measures of political predispositions. Most importantly, we complement these analyses with an in-depth look at the social effects that bureaucracies are perceived to have.

### Second Study: Main Effects

With respect to the baseline models, the results of our second survey are very similar to the first survey. When the term “bureaucrat” is used, respondents’ evaluations of trustworthiness and corruption turn significantly more negative. Additionally, the second survey clearly reveals that the differences between “government bureaucrats” and “bureaucrats” are negligible. Both descriptions of public employees evoke similar reactions. In our analyses, there are only minor differences in the magnitude of the effects of these two terms, while the direction and levels of statistical significance of any effects remain the same. These findings address possible concerns that the term bureaucrat may also be perceived as applying to non-governmental (e.g., corporate) actors.

A visualization of the baseline results can be found in Figure 3.

### Second Study: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

In addition to confirming our baseline results, the second survey also somewhat replicates the interaction effects we found in our first survey between SDO and our bureaucracy framing. Both the “bureaucrat” and the “government bureaucrat” treatments exhibit comparable interactive effects with our measure of SDO. Despite slight changes to the magnitude of our results, they are in the same direction and generally at a high (95%) level of statistical significance. Moreover, as in our first survey, we found no interactive effects with measures of party affiliation and ideology.

Similar to the baseline results, a visualization of the interaction effects can be found in Figure 3.

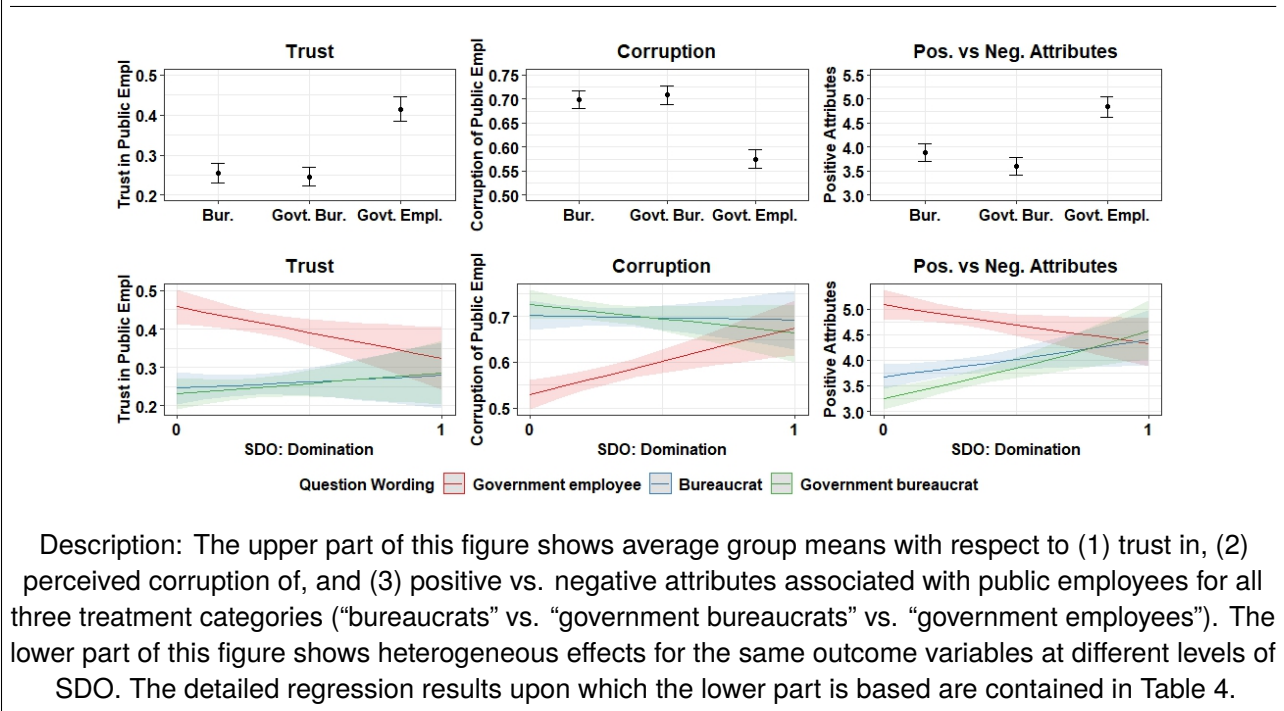
### Commonalities and Differences Between the First and Second Survey

The key commonality between the heterogeneous results from the first and second survey is that low-SDO individuals view public employees in a significantly more negative light when they are portrayed as bureaucrats whereas high-SDO individuals rate public employees similarly across all treatment conditions.

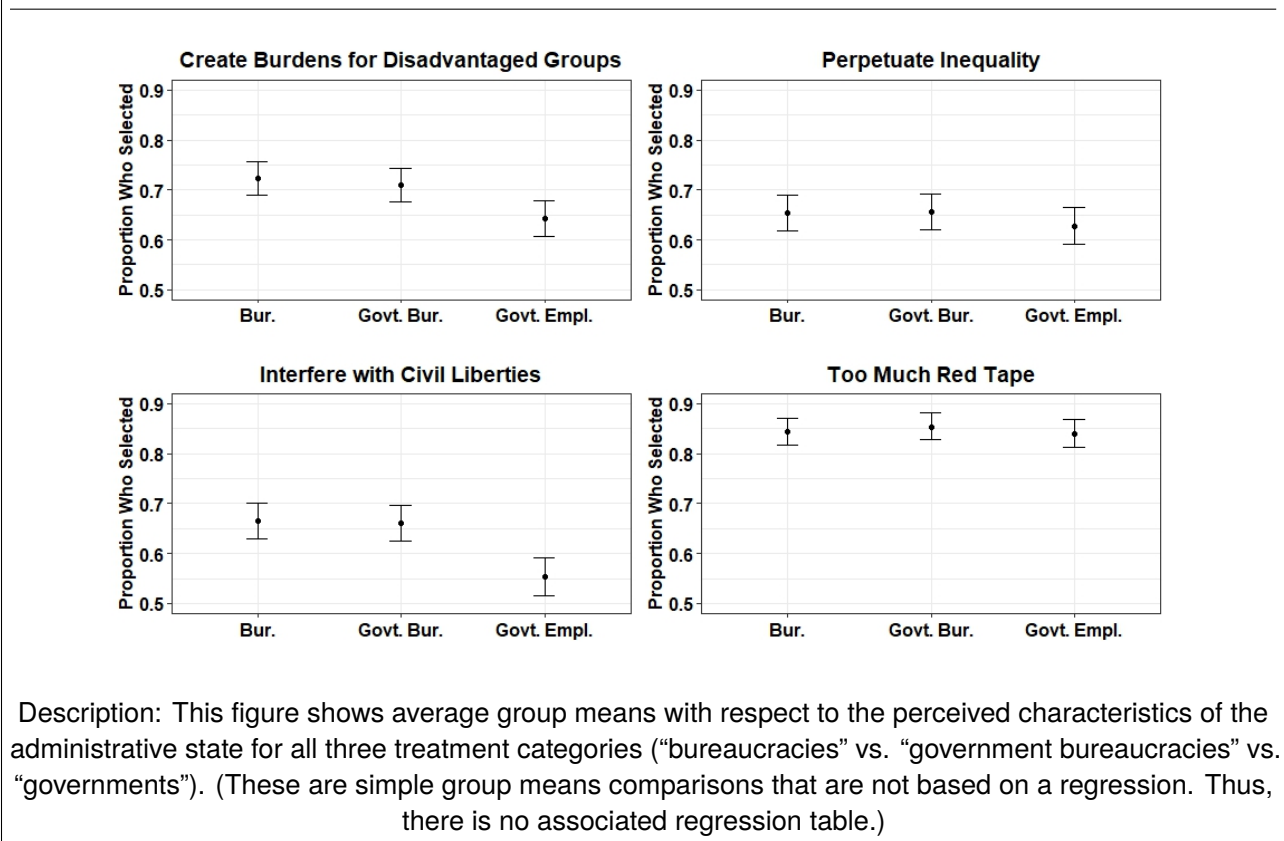
Despite these commonalities, one distinction should be pointed out. In the first survey, high-SDO individuals generally viewed government employees *positively* regardless of how they were described. However, in the second survey, we observe the exact opposite dynamic, such that high-SDO individuals generally view public employees *negatively* across all conditions.

We believe a simple and straightforward

**FIGURE 3. Survey 2: Key Results and Interactions (Perceptions of Public Employees)**



**FIGURE 4. Survey 2: Additional Results (Perceptions of Public Employees)**



**TABLE 4. Second Survey: Heterogeneous Effects**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Trust	Corr.	Attr.	Trust	Corr.	Attr.	Trust	Corr.	Attr.
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Pois.</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Pois.</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Pois.</i>
	Interaction w. SDO			Interaction w. Ideology			Interaction w. Party ID		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	
Bur.	-0.213*** (0.032)	0.173*** (0.023)	-0.324*** (0.044)	-0.207*** (0.034)	0.143*** (0.026)	-0.245*** (0.046)	-0.155*** (0.030)	0.115*** (0.023)	-0.166*** (0.045)
Gov. Bur.	-0.228*** (0.031)	0.198*** (0.023)	-0.449*** (0.045)	-0.212*** (0.035)	0.135*** (0.026)	-0.297*** (0.049)	-0.200*** (0.030)	0.157*** (0.023)	-0.388*** (0.049)
SDO	-0.134** (0.058)	0.146*** (0.043)	-0.161** (0.076)						
Bur.*SDO	0.168** (0.083)	-0.155** (0.062)	0.339*** (0.116)						
G.B.*SDO	0.189** (0.081)	-0.210*** (0.061)	0.502*** (0.117)						
Ideology				-0.244*** (0.042)	0.165*** (0.031)	-0.341*** (0.056)			
Bur.*Id.				0.086 (0.058)	-0.031 (0.044)	0.037 (0.083)			
G.B.*Id.				0.087 (0.058)	-0.005 (0.044)	0.008 (0.086)			
Democ.							0.206*** (0.030)	-0.110*** (0.023)	0.251*** (0.040)
Indep.							-0.047 (0.034)	0.019 (0.025)	-0.029 (0.048)
Bur.*De.							-0.049 (0.042)	0.034 (0.032)	-0.089 (0.059)
G.B.*De.							0.015 (0.042)	-0.016 (0.032)	0.118* (0.063)
Bur.*In.							0.050 (0.047)	-0.012 (0.036)	-0.083 (0.072)
G.B.*In.							0.101** (0.046)	-0.065* (0.035)	0.155** (0.073)
Constant	0.458*** (0.023)	0.529*** (0.017)	1.626*** (0.029)	0.539*** (0.025)	0.492*** (0.019)	1.743*** (0.032)	0.349*** (0.022)	0.612*** (0.016)	1.479*** (0.030)
Obs.	1,572	2,050	2,050	1,572	2,050	2,050	1,572	2,050	2,050
R <sup>2</sup>	0.064	0.059		0.097	0.085		0.151	0.089	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.061	0.056		0.094	0.083		0.147	0.085	

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01  
 Table shows regression analyses that are meant to identify possible heterogeneous effects. Three variables are used for interaction terms: (1) SDO, (2) political ideology, and (3) party ID. Results in regressions 1–3 show a consistent and significant interaction with SDO. At the same time, regressions 4–9 do not show consistently significant interaction terms with the other two concepts.

interpretation of these findings has to do with the party controlling the executive branch when both surveys were fielded. Donald Trump was president when the first survey was conducted, and he exhibited a world view that aligns more closely with the values and beliefs of high-SDO individuals. Conversely, Joe Biden was president when our second survey was conducted, and he espouses policy positions that reflect egalitarian values and commitments. Because public employees may be seen as affiliated with the current officeholder of the presidency, the observed drop could be explained by this change. However, this is just an initial interpretation and future studies would need to more precisely test whether changes in the presidency indeed can explain these patterns.

### **Mechanisms: Stereotypes about Bureaucracies and Bureaucrats**

In the second survey, we put special emphasis on testing the mechanisms that explain our results. First, with respect to the core characteristics of bureaucrats that we hypothesize explain the negative effect on perceptions of our bureaucracy framing (i.e., incompetence, corruption, and unresponsiveness), we find that respondents are significantly more likely to associate these characteristics with “(government) bureaucrats.”

Moreover, with respect to the opposing binary statements that we described earlier, we also find that respondents are significantly more likely to select the statement that suggests the administrative state puts more burdens on groups that are already at a disadvantage in society when it is framed as a “bureaucracy” or “government bureaucracy.” This finding points to the validity of the underlying mechanism we propose. A detailed visualization

of results regarding all four binary statements can be found in Figure 4.

### **Discussion**

Overall, in both surveys we find strong evidence that framing public employees as “bureaucrats” (or “government bureaucrats”) leads respondents to view them as (1) significantly less trustworthy and (2) significantly more corrupt. Both surveys also reveal that bureaucrats are more likely to be perceived as being motivated by their own ideology and that bureaucracies are perceived as maintaining power differences between groups in society. These findings are in line with (1) the history of bureaucracy bashing in the US, (2) our contention that bureaucracies/bureaucrats are perceived as maintaining social hierarchies and group-level inequalities, and (3) the negative connotation of the term “bureaucracy” that can be traced back to its origins in the eighteenth century.

Interestingly, when we test for heterogeneous treatment effects, we find that neither political ideology nor partisan affiliation exhibit consistently significant interactions with our framing manipulation. From a political perspective, this is somewhat counter-intuitive as bureaucracy bashing is seemingly more common on the right of the (American) political spectrum. However, these findings also underscore that the negative connotation of the term bureaucracy transcends political groups, making our main findings of even greater societal relevance.

While we do not find a conditional effect based on political ideology or partisan affiliation, we consistently observe a strong heterogeneous effect of our bureaucracy framing with SDO. In line with our discussion of the potential importance

of ideological preferences for intergroup inequality and domination in society, the effects of the bureaucracy framing on citizens' views of public employees are significantly moderated by SDO. Specifically, we find that those who are *low* in SDO (and who thus oppose intergroup hierarchies in society) react much more negatively to bureaucratic depictions of public employees and the administrative state than those who do not. This is a partial confirmation of our expectations about why SDO could drive views of bureaucracy.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, with respect to both our baseline results about negative perceptions of bureaucrats and the interaction effects we find with SDO, the second survey also delivers strong evidence regarding the underlying mechanisms that drive negative evaluations of government bureaucrats/bureaucracies. Specifically, our results indicate that people are more likely to associate three essential negative stereotypes with (government) bureaucrats (unresponsiveness, corruption, and incompetence). Additionally, people tend to believe that (government) bureaucracies put more burdens on people who are already at a disadvantage in society. We believe these stereotypes are crucial to understanding the interactive effects with SDO that we found in both surveys. In particular, we believe that commonly held stereotypes of bureaucracies as hierarchical, domineering, and unresponsive conflict most strongly with the egalitarian values and motives of low-SDO individuals, which explains why they are public employees more negatively when they are described as bureaucrats and thus agents of the bureaucrat.

<sup>9</sup>A full confirmation would have included that those respondents who are in favor of intergroup hierarchies in society are more appreciative of bureaucratic organization.

There are, of course, alternative explanations for our results with regard to the role of SDO. First, based on the literature on identity-based political sorting (Mason 2018), one could argue that the effects we find for SDO simply reflect a more basic attachment to conservatism/liberalism as an identity. Perhaps respondents are more fundamentally attached to their ideological identities as liberals and conservatives, and they simply adopt the symbolic ideological beliefs of their respective political ingroups to demonstrate their group affiliation.

Second, one could argue that our results are in fact driven by attachment to white identity. Previous work has found a high correlation between measures of white identity and measures of SDO (Jardina 2019). Perhaps white respondents who identify more strongly with their racial ingroup are motivated to maintain racial hierarchies in US society and are thus more likely to both endorse ideologies that legitimize racial inequality and to also view the hierarchical, status-quo maintaining characteristics of bureaucracies favorably.

However, neither ideological identity nor white identity exhibit a significant interaction with our bureaucracy framing. Thus, these are not strong alternative explanations.

Finally, an important possible criticism of our results is that respondents may view “government bureaucrats” and “government employees” as substantively different groups. We have aimed to address this possible shortcoming through the message displayed to all respondents in the second survey, in which we explicitly lay out that the questions refer to all government employees at the local, state, and federal levels. However, some readers may suspect that there could still be differences in the composition of both groups that

affect respondents' evaluations.

Our reply to these important concerns is three-fold. First, in our first survey, we asked a series of preceding questions about various government institutions and services. This series of questions is likely to have given respondents an identical understanding of what the substantive, underlying phenomena are that we are asking about. Thus, we have minimized the possibility that there is a substantive difference in respondents' understanding of what we are referring to when we ask about "bureaucrats" and "government bureaucrats". Second, the magnitude of the effect we observe is striking. A small modification in labels can induce a dramatic change in evaluations. Even if respondents perceive minor differences in the composition of bureaucrats vs. government employees, the strength of our results and the validity of our study design make us confident that our results are capturing something real and important.

## CONCLUSION

For decades, politicians and media personalities in the US have debated the appropriate scope of the administrative state in public life. Opponents of large government administration frequently seek to depict the government as a bureaucracy and in turn public employees as bureaucrats, often in order to cast government employees and institutions in a pejorative light. We contend that such language negatively affects on citizens' trust in public employees and government institutions.

Indeed, bureaucracies are frequently portrayed as organizations that are hierarchical, inflexible, and perpetuate the societal status quo. The pervasiveness and persistence of these stereotypes

likely has a major effect on how citizens view public institutions and government employees. We suspect there may be a connection between the rise in bureaucracy bashing by political elites in recent decades and the steady decline of trust in American public institutions.

In the present study, we thus sought to test whether bureaucratic depictions of government affect citizens' trust in public employees with an equivalence framing experiment. In line with the pejorative history and meaning of the term "bureaucracy," we argue that describing employees of the administrative state as bureaucrats brings to mind negative stereotypes that lead citizens to view those employees as less trustworthy and more corrupt. We find strong evidence to support our hypotheses. Across two survey experiments, we find that strong main effects for our framing manipulation. When public employees are depicted as "bureaucrats"/"government bureaucrats," respondents perceive them to be less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less motivated to serve the public good.

We also examined our results for heterogeneous treatment effects across three important political predispositions relevant to contemporary American politics: ideological identification, partisanship, and social dominance orientation (SDO).

We find little evidence of an interaction between our framing manipulation and political ideology or partisan affiliation. While this result is perhaps surprising, it underscores that negative perceptions of bureaucrats and bureaucracy transcend major political divides in the US.

We do however find a significant interaction between our framing manipulation and SDO in both surveys. Due to the social hierarchy- reinforce-

ing characteristics of bureaucracies, we postulated that individuals who exhibit high levels of SDO might be more likely to embrace the administrative state when it is described as a bureaucracy. Although we consistently observe heterogeneous treatment effects with SDO across both surveys, our results are driven by individuals who exhibit *low* levels of SDO (and thus high levels of egalitarianism). It was only among low-SDO respondents that perceptions of trust and corruption changed in response to bureaucratic depictions of public employees, with low-SDO respondents more likely to view public employees negatively when they were described as bureaucrats.

In the second survey, we provide further empirical evidence that bureaucracies are generally perceived as maintaining the status quo and reinforcing inequalities between groups. We postulate that this is because bureaucracies are seen as maintaining the social status quo and creating administrative burdens for marginalized social groups, these organizations are perceived less favorably by those who reject social hierarchies.

Our results contribute to the growing literature in American politics on the determinants of citizens' trust in government (Achen and Bartels 2017; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Lerman 2019; Citrin and Stoker 2018). We also contribute to the growing literature in public administration on perceptions and evaluations of the administrative state by fully focusing on the language that is used to describe it (Marvel 2015; Teodoro and An 2018).

More broadly, We believe our results have practical—and political—implications. First, our findings suggest that even subtle changes in language can alter how citizens think about the government and employees of the administrative state.

It is perhaps no coincidence that public trust in government began a sharp decline following the rise of firebrand Conservative leaders such as Newt Gingrich and Ronald Reagan, who—as touched upon above—frequently and strategically depicted the federal government as a bloated bureaucracy managed by self-interested and corrupt elites. While the study at hand does not analyze over-time trends in political elites' rhetoric, our findings suggest that changes in the language used by political elites to describe the government may help explain changes in the American public's attitudes toward public institutions. Our study therefore speaks to an often cited but rarely explored supposition that “bureaucracy bashing” by political elites (a strategy that relies heavily on subtle changes in language) has contributed to the American public's declining trust in government (cf. Caillier 2018; Garrett et al. 2006; Lerman 2019).<sup>10</sup>

Second, our results suggest that both practitioners and academics should think much more carefully about the specific language they use to describe the government, especially when addressing large audiences of non-specialists. To many people—and especially those who do not study bureaucracies—the term can prime negative stereotypes of public employees that may be unintended by the speaker. Given the centrality of modern bureaucracies to society and their prominence in political discourse, it is infeasible to dispense with the term entirely. However, when academics or politicians use the term, they should be very clear about its definition and how bureaucracies relate to other government institutions (for a detailed perspective, see Vogler 2023).

<sup>10</sup>See also Boomgaarden and de Vreese (2007) on the case of the Netherlands.

Being careful about the use of language is important, especially when it potentially has a substantive effect on support for public public services. As recently as September 2020, PEW Research (Pew Research Center 2020) reported that, despite holding overwhelmingly negative opinions of the trustworthiness of government officials and programs, a majority of Americans still want the government to play a more active role in providing health care, fighting poverty, and regulating the economy. Such policy changes would ultimately require substantial increases in the size of the administrative state. Thus, the question remains as to how the government can restore its reputation and procure the necessary resources to meet citizens' needs (Lerman 2019). Crucially, answering this question requires a better understanding of the reasons for the public's trust (or lack thereof) in government.

A third contribution is our account of the interaction between social dominance orientation and exposure to bureaucratic portrayals of public employees. Our consistent finding across both surveys that SDO moderates the effect of bureaucratic depictions of government points to the importance of accounting for political predispositions and personality traits in studies that focus on trust in government (Lee and Van Ryzin 2020; Yackee and Lowery 2005).

In an age of growing political polarization and instability—partly caused by deep disagreements over the proper role of the (administrative) state in public life—identifying the determinants of the public's attitudes toward the state is useful to both academics and policy makers. We find that the language used to describe public employees and government institutions affects the extent to which citizens' view them as trustworthy and

competent. Thus, scholars and the media should carefully consider the effect that the language they use to describe public employees and government may have on citizens' trust in these actors and institutions, which are so central to democracy and the provision of public goods.

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## Appendix

Table 5 shows the results of our second survey with population weights included. Although there are minor changes to the magnitude and significance of effects, the substantive interpretation of the results remains unchanged. Accordingly, the inclusion or exclusion of weights does not affect our study in a substantial way.

**TABLE 5. Second Survey: Heterogeneous Effects (With Population Weights)**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Trust	Corr.	Attr.	Trust	Corr.	Attr.	Trust	Corr.	Attr.
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Pois.</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Pois.</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Pois.</i>
	Interaction w. SDO			Interaction w. Ideology			Interaction w. Party ID		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	
Bur.	-0.194*** (0.033)	0.158*** (0.025)	-0.292*** (0.047)	-0.171*** (0.036)	0.125*** (0.028)	-0.214*** (0.050)	-0.139*** (0.028)	0.099*** (0.021)	-0.150*** (0.041)
Gov. Bur.	-0.230*** (0.032)	0.207*** (0.024)	-0.471*** (0.048)	-0.206*** (0.037)	0.107*** (0.029)	-0.304*** (0.053)	-0.179*** (0.028)	0.144*** (0.022)	-0.374*** (0.046)
SDO	-0.150*** (0.057)	0.136*** (0.043)	-0.087 (0.077)						
Bur.*SDO	0.177** (0.081)	-0.153** (0.063)	0.300** (0.117)						
G.B.*SDO	0.242*** (0.080)	-0.250*** (0.062)	0.567*** (0.118)						
Ideology				-0.040*** (0.007)	0.027*** (0.006)	-0.062*** (0.010)			
Bur.*Id.				0.011 (0.010)	-0.005 (0.008)	0.005 (0.014)			
G.B.*Id.				0.018* (0.010)	0.005 (0.008)	0.008 (0.015)			
Democ.							0.227*** (0.030)	-0.106*** (0.023)	0.252*** (0.041)
Indep.							-0.062** (0.032)	0.024 (0.024)	-0.036 (0.046)
Bur.*De.							-0.040 (0.042)	0.033 (0.033)	-0.070 (0.060)
G.B.*De.							-0.005 (0.042)	-0.011 (0.034)	0.105 (0.065)
Bur.*In.							0.058 (0.044)	-0.0005 (0.035)	-0.095 (0.069)
G.B.*In.							0.120*** (0.042)	-0.055 (0.034)	0.178*** (0.068)
Constant	0.436*** (0.024)	0.541*** (0.018)	1.579*** (0.031)	0.511*** (0.027)	0.500*** (0.020)	1.742*** (0.034)	0.331*** (0.020)	0.613*** (0.015)	1.474*** (0.028)
Obs.	1,572	2,050	2,050	1,572	2,050	2,050	1,572	2,050	2,050
R <sup>2</sup>	0.053	0.051		0.082	0.078		0.153	0.075	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.050	0.049		0.079	0.075		0.148	0.071	

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01  
 Table shows regression analyses that are meant to identify possible heterogeneous effects. Three variables are used for interaction terms: (1) SDO, (2) political ideology, and (3) party ID. Results in regressions 1–3 show a consistent and significant interaction with SDO. At the same time, regressions 4–9 do not show consistently significant interaction terms with the other two concepts.