

# Antiegalitarians for Bureaucracy? Bureaucratic Depictions of Government, Preferences for Group Domination, and Trust in Government Employees (Working Paper\*)

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## Abstract

In popular fiction and the news media, the words “government” and “bureaucracy” are often used interchangeably to describe the administrative state. However, we argue that these words do not carry the same connotation. Labeling the government as a bureaucracy has the (often unintended) effect of priming citizens to view government employees as less responsive, more corrupt, and more anti-egalitarian in their orientation toward the public. Indeed, the term “bureaucracy” has had a pejorative meaning since its original use in the eighteenth century to describe governments ruled by unelected technocrats and desk jockeys. What effect, then, does describing the government as a bureaucracy have on citizens’ perceptions of the trustworthiness and competence of government employees? We argue that bureaucratic depictions of government prime negative, anti-egalitarian stereotypes of government workers, which in turn lead citizens to view government employees with greater distrust. However, we expect this effect to be conditional on citizens’ preferences for intergroup domination and group inequality in society. Because bureaucracy is associated with inflexibility, hierarchy, and the reinforcement of the status quo, we hypothesize that individuals who are high in social dominance orientation (SDO) will view government employees *more favorably* when they are described as bureaucrats, whereas those who oppose group inequality will view them *more negatively*. We test these predictions with an online survey experiment conducted in the US with 1,100 adults. Our results largely confirm our expectations. On average, we find that describing government employees as bureaucrats leads respondents to view them as less trustworthy and more corrupt. Moreover, we find that the effect of bureaucratic depictions on trust in government employees is conditional on citizens’ ideological preferences for group domination in society.

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# 1 Introduction: Declining Trust in Government

Trust in government institutions among the American public has declined precipitously over the last half century (Citrin and Muste, 1999; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Hetherington, 2005; Lerman, 2019; Levi and Stoker, 2000). This downward trend has sparked a wealth of scholarship on the origins of the public’s declining trust, highlighting numerous potential contributing factors, including growing partisan polarization (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Jones, 2015; Lerman, 2019; Robison and Mullinix, 2016; Theiss-Morse, Barton and Wagner, 2015), increasingly negative media coverage of political campaigns and government scandals (Aalberg, Strömbäck and De Vreese, 2012; Geer, 2012), dissatisfaction with changes in government policy and government services (Miller, 1974; Norris, 2014; Tyler and Jackson, 2014), generational turnover (Dalton and Shin, 2014), and even variation in genetically inherited baseline trust levels (Mondak, Hayes and Canache, 2017; Ojeda, 2016).

However, while this previous work focuses mainly on social factors and individual differences as sources of trust/distrust, our study is one of the first to examine whether the language we use to describe the government negatively affects citizens’ trust in government officials. Specifically, we argue that the term bureaucracy—which scholars and pundits often use to describe large-scale government programs and the state apparatus more generally—carries a pejorative connotation, which brings to mind negative stereotypes of government employees as disinterested, corrupt, and unresponsive to the needs of citizens. Thus, when political commentators use the term bureaucracy to describe parts of the government, they (often unintentionally) prime negative stereotypes of government workers in the audience’s mind and make them more likely to view government employees with distrust. Utilizing an online survey experiment with 1,100 US adults, we indeed find evidence that describing employees of the administrative state as bureaucrats (rather than as government employees)

leads survey respondents to rate government workers as significantly less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less likely to serve the public interest. The implications of our results are broad. First, our findings suggest that subtle changes in language, holding all else constant, can substantially alter how citizens think about the government. This insight opens up a host of theoretical possibilities worth exploring, including the possibility that over-time-changes in the language used by political elites to describe the government might have contributed to Americans' increasingly negative views of government.

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 frequently, and intentionally, depicted the federal government as a bloated, corrupt bureaucracy. Although the study at hand does not analyze over-time trends in the rhetoric used by political elites to describe the government, we believe our results suggest that such a project would be a worthwhile endeavor, especially if it could illuminate how temporal changes in the negative (and positive) depictions of government used by political commentators track with changes in public opinion. Our results thus speak to an often cited but rarely explored supposition that “bureaucracy bashing” by political elites (a strategy which relies heavily on subtle changes in language) has contributed to the increasing distrust of government institutions among voters (cf. [Caillier, 2018](#); [Garrett, Thurber, Fritschler and Rosenbloom, 2006](#); [Lerman, 2019](#)).<sup>1</sup>

Second, our results suggest that political scientists should think more carefully about the language they use to describe the government, especially if their goal is to present an objective, value-neutral analysis of citizens' preferences regarding the size and scope of government. As recently as September 2020, [PEW Research \(2020\)](#) reported that, despite holding overwhelmingly negative opinions of the trustworthiness of government officials and

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<sup>1</sup>See also [Boomgaarden and de Vreese \(2007\)](#) on the case of the Netherlands.

programs, a majority of Americans still want the government to play a more active role in providing healthcare, fighting poverty, and regulating the economy—policy changes that 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. Crucially, answering this question requires a better understanding of the causes and consequences of the public’s trust (or lack thereof) in government.

A third contribution of the study at hand is our explication of the interaction between system-justifying worldviews and exposure to bureaucratic portrayals of government employees. 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](#); [Herd and Moynihan, 2019](#); [Nisar, 2017](#)), we hypothesize that individuals who prefer intergroup domination and inequality in society will find the characteristics of bureaucracies appealing and will therefore view government employees more positively when they are described as bureaucrats. Our study thus illuminates the role of system-justifying ideologies and preferences for group domination in shaping how citizens’ respond to bureaucratic depictions of the government. We expect this counterintuitive result precisely because bureaucracies are believed to be unresponsive to the needs of citizens (and specifically marginalized groups). Indeed, research in public administration finds that bureaucratic forms of administration tend to create greater “administrative burdens” for members of poor and marginalized groups in society ([Gaikwad and Nellis, 2021](#); [Herd and Moynihan, 2019](#); [Nisar, 2017](#)). In this sense, negative stereotypes of bureaucracy carry some truth, to the extent that bureaucratic forms of administration often hinder rather than advance social equality.

Bureaucratic depictions of government therefore ought to positively appeal to individuals who prefer hierarchical, domineering social systems that reinforce rather than attenuate existing group differences. Specifically, we predict that individuals who score highly on a measure of social dominance orientation (and who therefore favor intergroup domination and inequality) should—perhaps counter-intuitively—express higher levels of trust in government employees when they are described as bureaucrats. Conversely, individuals who are low in SDO (and who thus oppose intergroup domination and inequality) ought to view government employees as less trustworthy when they are described as bureaucrats, precisely because bureaucracies are viewed as being unresponsive to the needs of citizens.

Finally, there is an important practical justification for the research presented here: Citizens’ trust in the state and its representatives is of central importance for the long-term stability of democracy and society. Democracy can only function if a sufficiently large number of citizens maintain trust in public institutions and employees. Therefore, it is prudent to consider what effect, if any, the language used by politicians (and the media) to describe the government has on the public’s trust in public institutions. Moreover, the extent to which government intervention in society is desirable remains one of the central political debates of our time (if not the most important) and identifying whether “bureaucracy bashing” negatively biases citizens’ views of the state should help to further clarify citizens’ true preferences regarding the size and scope of government.

## 2 Theory

### 2.1 “Bureaucracy” Bashing

The word bureaucracy, for most people, brings to mind negative stereotypes of indifferent and corrupt administrators, tedious paperwork, and government red tape. Indeed, the term was first coined by the French philosopher Vincent De Guornay in the eighteenth century to describe governments ruled by unelected pencil pushers and impersonal, administrative hierarchies (Crooks and Parsons, 2016). De Guornay viewed bureaucracy as a threat to personal liberty and economic prosperity because of its reliance on excessive rules and regulations and its lack of democratic accountability. In French, the word bureaucracy roughly translates to “writing desk government,” and its original nineteenth-century definition in English was “office tyranny.” From the outset, then, the word bureaucracy has conveyed a pejorative image of government administration as corrupt, unresponsive, and authoritarian (Deak, 2015).

The German Sociologist Max Weber famously argued that bureaucracy, despite its impersonal, hierarchical structure, represents the most effective or rational form of government administration due to its reliance on technical competence and focus on maximizing social and economic outcomes (Crooks and Parsons, 2016). According to Weber, the ideal bureaucracy is characterized by a hierarchical division of labor based on technical competence and meritocratic hiring as well as a strict adherence to rules and standard operating procedures (Charasz and Vogler, 2021; Vogler, 2023). However, Weber also saw large state bureaucracies as a threat to individual freedom, trapping individuals in an “iron cage” of dehumanizing rationality.

In contemporary American politics, political elites and the media often portray the gov-

ernment in a deprecatory, pejorative light by describing it as an unresponsive, corrupt bureaucracy (Garrett et al., 2006). Prominent right-wing media personalities have even gone so far as to claim that government employees, especially members of an alleged “deep state,” actively seek to undermine the democratic will of the people (cf. Chaffetz, 2018; Lofgren, 2016). In the public administration literature, this phenomenon is referred to as “bureaucracy bashing,” and citizens have been found to be highly receptive to such negative portrayals of the administrative state, which often lead to poorer evaluations of the (perceived) competence of government agencies (Caillier, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Research in the field of public administration suggests that messages sent 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 (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. For example, a study based on in-depth interviews with high-level federal administrators found that widely publicized instances of “bureaucracy bashing” by politicians—that is, describing government employees as incompetent and corrupt—lowers morale among federal employees and undermines administrators’ ability to effectively collaborate with political appointees and implement policy (Garrett et al., 2006), creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of government dysfunction (cf. Lerman, 2019).<sup>3</sup>

However, few studies have empirically tested whether “bureaucracy bashing” influences citizens’ beliefs about the trustworthiness and competence of government employees. Given

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<sup>2</sup>While skepticism of the state is not as strong in most other advanced democracies as it is in the US, negative views of public bureaucracy are fairly common: In many other countries, too, the bureaucracy is typically thought of as representing “what is wrong with the country” (Peters, 2001, 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 quality of services provided and confirms existing negative views.



the prevalence of bureaucratic depictions of government in contemporary American politics, as well as the pejorative origins of the term “bureaucracy,” we predict that describing government employees as bureaucrats will cause people to view government workers as less trustworthy and more corrupt. This prediction leads to our first hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 1:*** Describing government employees as bureaucrats will lead respondents to view them as less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less likely to serve the public interest.

## **2.2 Social Dominance Orientation and Support for Bureaucracy**

Because bureaucracies, by definition, are perceived to be hierarchical, domineering, and unresponsive to the needs of vulnerable groups in society, we expect that citizens’ reactions to bureaucratic depictions of government will be conditional on the extent to which they prefer intergroup domination and inequality in society. According to social dominance theory, individuals who subscribe to system-justifying ideologies that legitimize group domination/inequality in society are significantly more likely to express support for hierarchical, anti-egalitarian social systems that reinforce existing inequalities between groups (Ho, Sidanius, Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, Pratto, Henkel, Foels and Stewart, 2015; Sidanius and Pratto, 2001; Sidanius, Levin, Federico and Pratto, 2001).

Recent work by Ho and Unzueta (2015), for example, has found that individuals who are high in SDO are more likely to support affirmative action policies when they believe that these policies will maintain existing social hierarchies by only hiring racial minorities for lower-status jobs in organizations. Ho and Unzueta explain their findings as the result of compatibility between system-justifying preferences for group domination and social programs that maintain existing social inequalities between groups.

Similarly, Knowles, Lowery and Schaumberg (2009) find that SDO among white Americans was positively associated with stronger support for Barack Obama during his first term as president, in part because Obama was perceived (at least initially) as endorsing a “color-blind” view of racial inequality.

Based on these previous contributions, which underscore relationship between system-justifying preferences for group domination and support for ostensibly liberal programs and candidates, we expect that individuals who are high in SDO will view government employees more favorably when they are described as bureaucrats, precisely because bureaucracies are thought to be hierarchical, domineering, and unresponsive to the needs of marginalized groups in society. This leads to our second hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 2:*** Support for system-justifying ideologies (in the form of SDO) will moderate the expected effects of our bureaucracy framing, such that individuals who are high in SDO will view government employees as more trustworthy and less corrupt when they are described as bureaucrats.

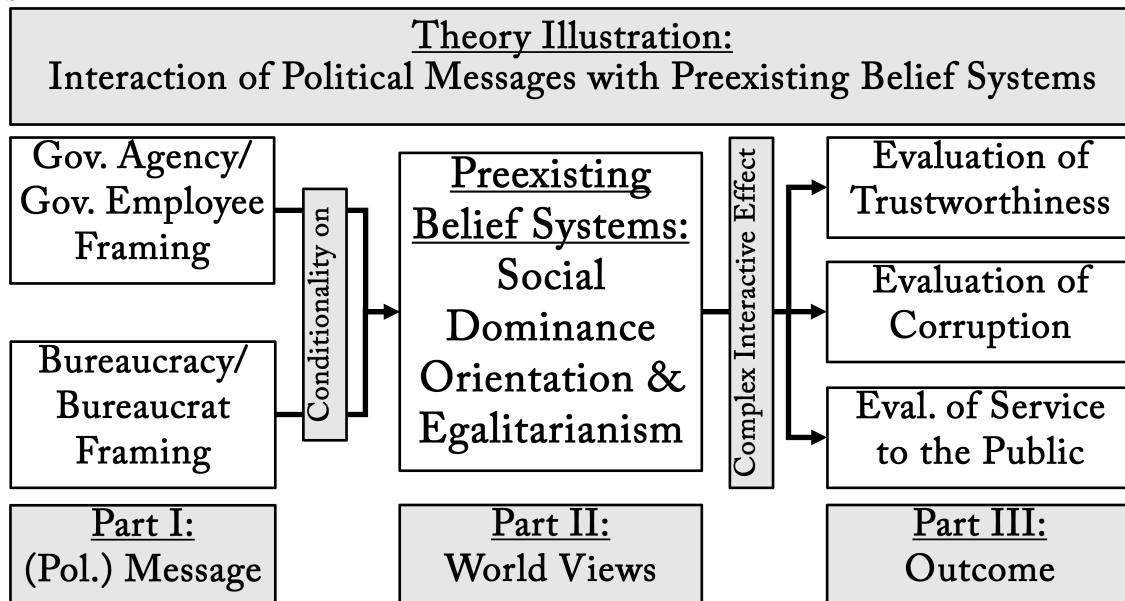
### **2.3 Bureaucracy Framing and Resonance with System-Justifying Ideologies**

In line with other classic work on elite-driven public opinion dynamics in American politics (Zaller, 1991; Zaller, 1992), our theory specifies a process through which message frames about government employees interact with citizens’ underlying political predispositions (in this case, support for system-justifying ideologies and intergroup domination), altering the considerations that come to mind when citizens think about government employees. Specifically, we argue that language that depicts government employees as bureaucrats interacts with system-justifying ideological preferences among the mass public, such that individuals

who support intergroup domination and inequality in society will view government employees as more trustworthy when they are described as bureaucrats. Conversely, we expect that individuals who oppose intergroup domination and inequality in society will view government employees as less trustworthy due to the perception that they seek to "maintain power differences between groups in society" and are indifferent to the suffering of marginalized groups.

Our theoretical framework is summarized in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1: Theory Illustration: Interaction of Political Messages with Preexisting Belief Systems



### 3 Empirical Test

#### 3.1 Randomization: Varying the Description of Government Employees

To test our above hypotheses, we carried out an online survey experiment with 1,100 US respondents in November of 2020 through the survey vendor Qualtrics. In the survey, re-

spondents first answered a series of demographic questions, followed by a series of questions measuring their political and ideological beliefs. Respondents then answered a series of questions about their perceptions of government agencies and employees. In order to directly test the effect of bureaucratic depictions of government administration on perceptions of the trustworthiness and corruption of government employees, we randomly varied the language that we used to describe employees of the administrative in the questions that respondents answered. In half of the sample, respondents answered questions that described employees of the administrative state as “government employees”; in the other half of the sample, respondents answered the same questions but with employees of the administrative state described as “bureaucrats” (“how much do you trust or distrust government employees/bureaucrats?”).

Respondents were also randomly assigned to select from a set of statements about what they believe motivates “government employees”/“bureaucrats,” including statements such as “serving the public as a whole,” “maintaining power differences between groups,” and “following their own ideology/partisanship.” Crucially, prior to answering questions about their perceptions of government workers, respondents were informed that the questions they would be answering pertain to their perceptions of the administrative state and its employees.

## 3.2 Outcome Variables

We measure citizens’ views of the administrative state through three primary and three auxiliary outcome variables.

1. ***Trust in employees of the administrative state:*** To construct a measure of trust, we asked respondents how much they “trust or distrust government employees/bureaucrats,” with possible answer choices ranging from “highly distrust” to “highly trust” on a seven-point Likert scale. For analysis, we recode responses to range from 0

(highly distrust) to 1 (highly trust).

2. *Perceptions of corruption among employees of the administrative state:*

To construct a measure of 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 code these answer choices as values of 2, 1, and 0, respectively.

3. *Perception that administrative state employees seek to serve the public as a whole:* To construct a (binary) measure of whether respondents believe that 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,” among all possible answers, we code it as a value of 1, and otherwise as 0.

4. *Perception that administrative state employees seek to maintain power differences between groups:* In order to measure whether respondents are more likely to view bureaucrats/bureaucracy as maintaining power differences between groups (a key claim of our theory), 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 “Maintaining power differences between groups in society,” among all possible answers, we code it as a value of 1, and otherwise as a 0.

5. *Perception that administrative state employees follow their own ideology:*

To construct a (binary) measure of whether respondents believe that administrative state employees primarily follow their own ideology, we asked respondents “What do you think

primarily motivates most government employees/bureaucrats?” If respondents choose “Their own political ideology / partisanship” from the list of possible answer choices, we code it as a value of 1, and otherwise as 0.

6. *Perception of administrative state employees as being aligned with the Democratic Party:* To construct this measure, we asked respondents “Which political party are government employees/bureaucrats typically more aligned with?” with three possible answer choices to select from: (1) “Democrats,” (2) “Republicans,” and (3) “Neither / on average it does not matter.” If they chose the first option, we code it as a value of 1, and otherwise as a 0.

### 3.3 Testing the Interaction Between System-Justifying Ideologies and Depictions of Government Employees as Bureaucrats

To test our second hypothesis about the conditional effect of SDO on bureaucratic depictions of government employees, we asked respondents to answer a set of six questions measuring their preferences for group domination and group inequality prior to answering questions about their perceptions of government employees. These items are drawn from the SDO-7 measure of social dominance orientation (SDO), which captures two separate dimensions of SDO relating to (1) beliefs about the legitimacy of intergroup domination (e.g., “some groups are simply inferior to other groups”) and (2) normative beliefs about the justness of maintaining group inequalities (e.g., “it is unjust to try to make groups equal”). The first dimension of SDO is labeled *SDO-Dominance*, and it is defined by Ho et al. (2015) as “a preference for systems of group-based dominance in which high status groups forcefully oppress lower status groups.” The second dimension is labeled *SDO-Antiegalitarianism*, and it represents “a preference for systems of group-based inequality that are maintained by an

interrelated network of subtle hierarchy-enhancing ideologies and social policies” (Ho et al., 2015). Though the two dimensions are highly correlated, a number of studies employing confirmatory factor analysis have found that the two dimensions load on separate factors

In the case of both dimensions of SDO, we code each question such that higher scores indicate greater support for group domination (SDO-Dominance) and group inequality (SDO-Antiegalitarianism). We then average together the questions that comprise each dimension and recode the variables to range from 0 (low-SDO) - 1 (high-SDO).

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we examine the effect of our bureaucracy framing on respondents’ perceptions of government employees. We seek to demonstrate that our subtle framing manipulation produces measurable differences in respondents’ perceptions of government employees’ motives, trustworthiness, and corruption. Due to the negative stereotypes of government administration associated with the term “bureaucracy,” we expect that our bureaucracy manipulation will lead respondents to view government workers as less responsive to the public and significantly more antiegalitarian in their motives (e.g., we expect that respondents will be more likely to believe that government employees are motivated by a desire to “maintain power differences between groups in society” when we describe employees as bureaucrats). Importantly, we do not expect SDO to moderate perceptions of government workers’ motives; rather, we expect SDO to moderate whether respondents view those motives positively or not. Individuals high and low in SDO should be just as likely to view government workers as being motivated by a desire to “maintain power differences between groups in society” in the bureaucracy framing condition. And as

the results we report below illustrate, this is indeed what we find.

## 4 Results

In this section, we present the results of our empirical analysis. We begin by examining the impact of our main experimental manipulation on all key outcome variables. Then, we move on to examine the interactive effects of our experimental condition with our measures of social dominance orientation. The section concludes with a summary of our findings.

### 4.1 Baseline Models: Experimental Manipulation (Bureaucracy Framing)

As discussed in the previous section, we implement one primary experimental manipulation in our survey: a change in question wording in which employees of the administrative state are described as either “government employees” or “bureaucrats”.

[Table 1](#) shows detailed results of the effect of our experimental manipulation on respondents’ perceptions of employees of the administrative state. The results indicate that our bureaucracy framing has a strong negative effect on respondents’ perceptions of government employees overall. The change in framing lowers trust in government employees as well as perceptions that government employees serve the public. Furthermore, framing government employees as bureaucrats increases respondents’ perceptions that corruption is a major problem among government employees. Crucially, we also find that respondents are more likely to view government employees as being motivated by a desire 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 government em-



employees as bureaucrats leads respondents to view government employees as “following their own ideology/partisanship” and being more aligned with the Democratic party. 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 our “bureaucrat” framing condition. Overall, these results indicate that describing government employees as bureaucrats strongly affects respondents’ perceptions of their trustworthiness and dedication to serving the public. We also find that bureaucratic depictions increase respondents’ perception that employees of the administrative state actively seek to maintain power differences between groups in society.

Table 1:

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Trust in Empl.	Perc. Corruption	Serve Public	Power Diff.	Own Ideo.	Dem. Align.
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>logistic</i>	<i>logistic</i>	<i>logistic</i>	<i>logistic</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Bureaucray Framing	−0.126*** (0.018)	0.069*** (0.018)	−0.840*** (0.156)	0.472** (0.204)	0.499*** (0.140)	−0.089 (0.136)
Constant	0.496*** (0.013)	0.721*** (0.013)	−1.001*** (0.095)	−2.458*** (0.157)	−1.360*** (0.105)	−0.971*** (0.095)
Observations	1,114	1,109	1,113	1,113	1,113	1,109
R <sup>2</sup>	0.043	0.013				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.042	0.012				
Akaike Inf. Crit.			1,096.894	720.848	1,244.537	1,288.334

Note: OLS, Logit

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## 4.2 Interaction Models—Social Dominance Orientation

Next, in line with our theory, we discuss the conditional effects of our experimental manipulation when interacting our bureaucracy framing with measures of system-justifying support for intergroup domination and group inequality. We begin with an analysis of the interaction between using bureaucratic language and SDO.

As [Figure 2](#) shows, there is a significant interactive effect of our bureaucracy framing

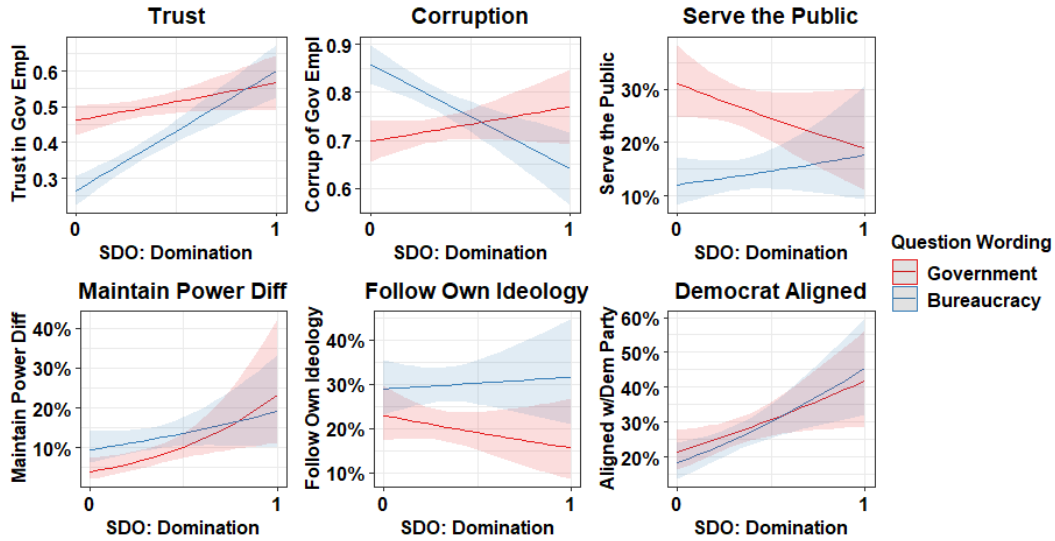
with the first dimension of SDO, *SDO-Dominance*, which measures support for ideological beliefs that legitimize intergroup group domination (for instance, “some groups are simply inferior to other groups in society”). Our results largely confirm our second hypothesis with some caveats. The interactive effect is most pronounced with respect to the measures of trust in government employees, perceptions of corruption, and perceptions that government employees serve the public. In all three cases, *SDO-Dominance* clearly moderates the impact that the bureaucracy framing has on respondents’ views of government employees.

Importantly, however, we observe an interesting dynamic. As [Figure 2](#) illustrates, the results are not primarily driven by individuals who exhibit high levels of SDO but instead by individuals who exhibit the lowest levels of SDO. The latter set of individuals perceive employees of the administrative state as significantly less trustworthy, more corrupt, and less motivated to serve the public when they are framed as “bureaucrats.”

Thus, although the results are primarily driven by one subset of the population (only those who reject group-based hierarchies), we believe they are still in line with our theory: We hypothesized that, because of the inflexible and hierarchical character of bureaucracies (that often primarily affects lower-status groups in society and reproduces social inequities, as suggested by [Herd and Moynihan \(2019\)](#) among others), describing government employees as bureaucrats should interact with respondents’ preferences for intergroup domination and inequality in society. Accordingly, in line with this reasoning, we see that individuals who reject social domination also reject bureaucracies, which manifests itself in lower levels of trust and higher perceived corruption.

[Figure 3](#) shows, the interactive effects of our bureaucracy framing and the second dimension of SDO, *SDO-Antiegalitarianism*, on respondents’ attitudes toward administrative state employees. As a reminder, the *SDO-Antiegalitarianism* measure captures normative

Figure 2: SDO: Dominance and Perceptions of Government Employees



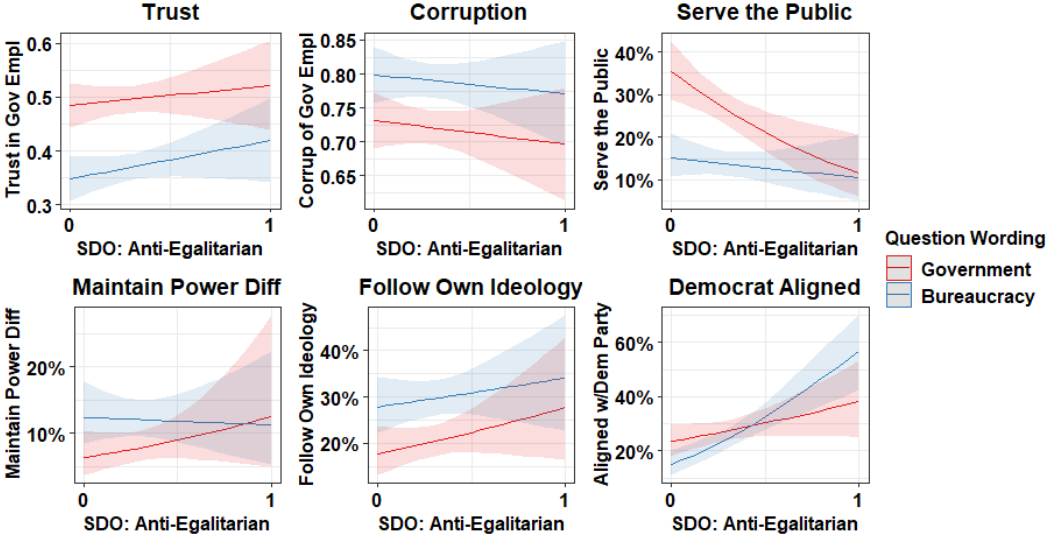
beliefs about the fairness and desirability of group inequality in society. Our results find weak evidence for a conditional effect of the antiegalitarianism dimension of SDO with our bureaucracy framing. We do find one significant effect, but in this case, SDO-Antiegalitarianism only predicts whether respondents in our bureaucracy framing condition perceive government employees as less likely to be motivated by a desire to serve the public. However, as in the case of SDO-Dominance, we again find that this result is driven by only one subset of the population: Instead of people who exhibit high levels of SDO-Antiegalitarianism, it is people who exhibit low levels of SDO-Antiegalitarianism who are primarily responsible for the observed effects.

Though our results admittedly deviate from our original predictions (in that we expected high-SDO individuals to react more strongly to our bureaucracy framing), we believe they still 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. Since bureaucracies are typically seen as extremely inflexible and hierarchical organizations that prevent

the socioeconomic advancement of lower-status groups, people who hold egalitarian values are less likely to believe that bureaucrats serve the public as a whole.

As expected, 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”). To reiterate, we argued that bureaucratic depictions should make respondents more likely to attribute antiegalitarian motives to government workers, including that they seek to “maintain power differences between groups in society”; but we did not predict that SDO should moderate differences in perceptions of employees’ motives—only that it should moderate how people feel about those motives.

Figure 3: Anti-Egalitarianism and Perceptions of Government Employees



### 4.3 Discussion

We find strong evidence that describing government employees as “bureaucrats” leads respondents to view them as (1) significantly less trustworthy, (2) more corrupt, (3) less likely to be motivated to serve the public, (4) more likely to maintain power differences between groups, and (5) more likely to follow their own ideology/partisanship. Thus, in line with our

first hypothesis, we find that bureaucratic depictions of government employees powerfully influence whether citizens view them positively and as serving the public good.

As previously theorized, the results of our empirical analysis also indicate that the effects of bureaucracy bashing on citizens' views of government employees are significantly moderated by ideological preferences for intergroup domination and group inequality in society. In line with our theoretical framework, we find interactive effects of SDO with our bureaucracy framing in the expected direction. At the same time, we also find that the effects are primarily driven by only those who oppose intergroup domination and inequality between groups in society. For this reason, our results slightly deviate from our original predictions.

Specifically, it is primarily individuals who are low in SDO that display significantly more negative attitudes toward government employees when they are described as bureaucrats, likely due to the hierarchical and inflexible nature of bureaucracies and the perception that they are more difficult to access for lower-status groups (and thus perpetuate existing inequalities). Similarly, those who subscribe to egalitarian values also view bureaucracy in a more negative light (in terms of whether or not it is serving the public as a whole), precisely because it is often perceived to contribute to the persistence of group-based inequality.

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. In the Appendix, we explore both of these competing explanations by testing whether ideological identity and white identity exhibit an interaction with our bureaucracy framing similar to what we find with SDO. As the analyses in our appendix demonstrate, neither ideological identity or white identity exhibit the same interaction with our bureaucracy framing as we found with SDO. Thus, we believe these variables cannot explain our results.

## 5 Conclusion

For decades, politicians and policy makers have debated the desirability and appropriate scope of the administrative state in public life. Yet the public debate surrounding the appropriate level of government intervention in society remains far from settled. This is in part related to the *vastly* different views that both citizens and policymakers express regarding the administrative state.

Thus, we ask: How do bureaucratic depictions of government affect citizens' trust in employees of the administrative state? We theorized that describing government employees as bureaucrats will bring to mind negative stereotypes that lead citizens to view them as less trustworthy and more corrupt. Indeed, we found evidence that simply describing government employees as "bureaucrats" (rather than as government employees) lead respondents to view them as less trustworthy, more corrupt, less likely to serve the public, and more likely to be motivated by their own ideology/partisanship in making decisions.

Furthermore, we examined whether measures of system-justifying preferences for inter-

group domination and group inequality moderate the effect of bureaucratic depictions of government on citizens attitudes toward government employees. Our theory predicted that, due to the hierarchy-reinforcing characteristics of bureaucracies, individuals who exhibit high levels of SDO will be more likely to embrace the administrative state when it is described as a bureaucracy. Vice versa, based on the same framework, we also expected those who score low on SDO to derogate government employees when they are described as bureaucrats. Importantly (and slightly deviating from the original predictions), though we observe that our results are only driven by individuals who exhibit low levels of SDO (and high levels of egalitarianism) instead of people who hold opposing views. In short, as bureaucracies maintain the social status quo and create administrative burdens for marginalized social groups, these organizations are seen less favorably by those who reject social hierarchies.

We believe that, by clearly differentiating and quantifying the key determinants of views of the administrative state, the results of this study have significant implications for both the academic literature and the policy world. In addition to the practical-political discourse on the role of the administrative state in public life and the detrimental effects of “bureaucracy bashing” on trust in government institutions, we contribute to a prominent literature in American politics that deals with the determinants of citizens’ declining trust in government more broadly (Achen, Bartels, Achen and Bartels, 2017; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Lerman, 2019). Second, we also contribute to a growing literature in public administration on perceptions and evaluations of the administrative state (Marvel, 2016; Teodoro and An, 2018).

In an age of growing political polarization and instability—partially caused by deep disagreements over the proper role of the (administrative) state in public life—clearly identifying the determinants of attitudes toward the state would be useful to both policy makers and

the leaders of political campaigns. Thus, although this research project only represents a first step in terms of addressing these issues, precise knowledge of the underlying causes and mechanisms of state skepticism and state appreciation is of great practical importance. As such, this project constitutes a first but *essential* step toward more comprehensively understanding the determinants of attitudes toward the American administrative state.



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## A Appendix

This appendix includes additional empirical evidence and further discussion of claims that were made in the main body of the study. In [subsection A.1](#), we extend our main analysis by considering the interactive effects of ideological identity as a factor that is distinct (yet not fully independent from) underlying belief systems. In [subsection A.2](#), we consider the alternative explanation of ‘white identity’ as a driver of our interaction results.

### A.1 Extension of the Main Analysis I: Political Ideology as an Alternative Explanatory Factor

In the main body of the study, we focused on the interaction of two dimensions of SDO with our bureaucracy framing in determining evaluations of the administrative state. In this section of the appendix, we consider respondents’ ideological identification as an alternative explanation for our results.

A possible criticism of the results we present in the main body of the study is that our findings are merely representative of a high degree of correlation between SDO and symbolic attachments to ideological identities. A possible criticism that could be made is that people who are low in SDO are more likely to be liberal, and it is their liberalism that makes them resent hierarchy-reinforcing institutions rather than their low level of SDO. A common interpretation in the political psychology literature is that the belief systems we analyze here are formed prior to political opinions. Thus, even if we picked up the same correlation with liberalism, one could point to comprehensive research that points out that politically ideology is causally posterior to belief systems. More importantly, however, as we illustrate in more detail below, we do not find the same kinds of results when we look at interactive effects of our treatment condition with ideological identification. This supports the perspective that our findings are genuinely driven by SDO as the key underlying aspect of belief systems rather than by ideological attachment.

#### A.1.1 The Concept of Ideological Identification

For the purpose of this study, we understand ideological identification as a unidimensional concept, ranging from full alignment with conservatism to full alignment with liberalism. Conservative ideology has long been associated with a preference for small government ([Converse, 1964](#)), which likely includes skepticism toward the administrative state and may amplify political messages that portray it in a negative way. In the current study, we employ a standard seven-item measure of ideological identification—not to be confused with ideological *sophistication*—which captures the extent to which survey respondents identify as liberal, moderate, or conservative. As an alternative to our primary theory (that focuses on individuals’ underlying belief systems), we formulate the following

***Rival Hypothesis 1:*** Individuals who identify as conservative will be more committed to principles of limited government and thus more susceptible to messages and language that paint the administrative state in a negative light.

### A.1.2 Empirical Measure

We measure political ideology in the following way:

***Ideological Identity Measure:*** In order to construct our measure of ideological identity, we ask respondents to rate their own ideological orientation on a seven-point scale from “extremely liberal” (3) to “extremely conservative” (-3).

### A.1.3 Empirical Results: Interaction Models

Now we turn to the empirical results for *ideological identification*. As [Table A1](#) shows, with respect to our key outcomes, the results obtained are substantively different from the SDO/egalitarianism results. We do not identify the same kind of interaction with respect to any of our three key outcome measures (trust in employees of the administrative state, perceptions of corruption, or the view that employees of the administrative state serve the public as a whole). These results not only indicate that political ideology is a substantively different measure when compared to SDO, but also that our key results are not driven the likely correlation of SDO and political ideology.

Table A1: Perceptions of the Administrative State and Interactions of Bureaucracy Framing with Political Ideology (Liberalism)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Trust — <i>OLS</i> (1)	Perceived Corr. — <i>OLS</i> (2)	Serve the Public — <i>logistic</i> (3)	Maintain Power Diff. — <i>logistic</i> (4)	Follow Own Ideo. — <i>logistic</i> (5)	Dem. Aligned <i>logistic</i> (6)
Bur. Frame	-0.126*** (0.018)	0.068*** (0.018)	-0.884*** (0.161)	0.460** (0.206)	0.543*** (0.142)	-0.063 (0.137)
Ideology	0.007 (0.007)	0.004 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.052)	-0.128 (0.086)	0.074 (0.058)	0.019 (0.052)
Bur. Frame x Ideology	-0.0002 (0.010)	0.002 (0.010)	0.115 (0.089)	0.148 (0.114)	-0.179** (0.079)	-0.166** (0.077)
Constant	0.494*** (0.013)	0.720*** (0.013)	-1.000*** (0.096)	-2.451*** (0.158)	-1.383*** (0.107)	-0.976*** (0.096)
Observations	1,114	1,109	1,113	1,113	1,113	1,109
R <sup>2</sup>	0.045	0.014				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.042	0.012				
Akaike Inf. Crit.			1,098.434	722.557	1,243.016	1,285.218

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## A.2 Extension of the Main Analysis II: White Identity as a Rival Explanation

Similar to SDO's possible correlation with political ideology, SDO may also be closely related to the concept of 'white identity.' White identity describes a psychological attachment to whiteness as a social identity. As SDO is a concept that prescribes the maintenance of social hierarchies, there could be a high correlation with white identity (that is focused on defending the social position of whites). Accordingly, scholars may suggest that white identity (rather than our conceptualization of SDO) is the true underlying cause of the observed relationship. As white identity thus represents an alternative explanation, we examine this possible rival theory below.

As shown in [Table A2](#), we find that white identity does not exhibit the same interactive effects with the bureaucracy framing as social dominance orientation. While this could be in part related to the smaller sample size, we rather believe that the complete absence of significant effects indicates that white identity is a distinct social phenomenon and cannot serve as a rival explanation to the interaction we find between our bureaucracy framing and SDO. In short, the absence of significant results also underscores that SDO rather than white identity is the primary driver of our results.

Table A2: Perceptions of the Administrative State and Interactions of Bureaucracy Framing with White Identity

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Trust — OLS	Perceived Corr. — OLS	Serve the Public — Logit	Maintain Power Diff. — Logistic	Follow Own Ideo. — Logistic	Dem. Aligned Logistic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Bur. Frame	-0.154*** (0.046)	0.109** (0.047)	-0.216*** (0.061)	0.055 (0.048)	0.075 (0.069)	-0.080 (0.070)
White Identity	0.079*** (0.014)	-0.001 (0.014)	0.019 (0.018)	0.031** (0.014)	-0.029 (0.021)	0.024 (0.021)
Bur. Frame x White ID	0.013 (0.020)	-0.022 (0.021)	0.030 (0.026)	-0.006 (0.021)	0.018 (0.030)	0.043 (0.030)
Constant	0.344*** (0.032)	0.720*** (0.033)	0.232*** (0.043)	0.017 (0.034)	0.264*** (0.049)	0.222*** (0.049)
Observations	698	697	698	698	698	696
R <sup>2</sup>	0.138	0.015	0.050	0.015	0.020	0.015
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.134	0.011	0.045	0.011	0.015	0.011

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01