(Non-)Partisan Oversight of the Executive Branch: Evidence from Congress and Offices of Inspector General

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Abstract

Congress delegates significant policy-making and administrative powers to federal agencies to cope with the growth of the scope of the U.S. federal government. To solve the principal-agent problem that this delegation creates, Congress conducts oversight, but scholars are divided on when Congress prioritizes ideology and partisan concerns over policy quality/valence concerns when conducting oversight. This paper examines this debate by analyzing Offices of Inspector General (OIG), offices housed in the executive branch that aim to minimize waste and fraud in agency operations. I posit that Congress is incentivized to manipulate the capacity and oversight agendas of these offices in order to achieve their political goals, in spite of the ostensibly non-partisan oversight that OIGs conduct. Using data on OIG budgets and non-statutory directives in appropriations reports, I find some evidence of political manipulation of OIGs, with Republicans secularly preferring less OIG oversight than Democrats. The results, though not final, imply that ideology and partisanship motivate congressional oversight, even through pathways focused on correcting policy valence.

Introduction

One fundamental problem driving the existence and growth of the federal bureaucracy in the United States is that Congress does not have the time or capacity to write all of the laws for the country on its own. Congress therefore delegates significant policymaking and policy implementation powers to federal agencies, anticipating that the expertise and capacity of agency bureaucrats will produce more effective policies. This delegation brings with it the principal-agent problem of ensuring that the policies produced by federal agencies do not stray too far from Congress's policy preferences, including ideological preferences and preferences over policy valence, otherwise known as quality.[1] Congress has utilized both ex-ante (statutory limitations on policy-making, appropriations riders, etc) and ex-post (committee hearings, mandatory reporting requirements) tools to solve this agency problem, but the relative success of these measures remains a hot topic of scholarly and popular debate.

Much of the literature on congressional oversight of the executive branch focuses on the question of whether ideology/partisanship or policy valence concerns predict oversight frequency/intensity and under what conditions members of Congress pursue one form of oversight over the other. Findings have been mixed, with some citing the predictive power of divided government and/or policy alignment on oversight (Kriner and L. Schwartz 2008, McGrath 2013, Parker and Dull 2013, Bolton 2022) and others citing policy valence concerns as important drivers of oversight, particularly in private communications with agencies (Lowande 2018). Although these motivations are not mutually exclusive, they are important to consider as they have down-stream implications for what forms of policy 'drift' get corrected, particularly given Congress's capacity constraints vis-a-vis the executive branch.

This paper contributes to this ongoing debate by examining Congress's interactions

[1] In this paper, I use the term 'valence' to refer to the quality of the implementation of a given policy, rather than the salience of a policy among the electorate. For example, a federal construction project that wastes money hiring expensive contractors with little experience would have lower valence than if said construction project were implemented with a cost-effective contractor instead. All actors are assumed to prefer a higher valence policy over a lower valence policy, holding ideological location constant (Hirsch and Shotts 2012).

with Offices of Inspector General (OIG), an understudied yet highly consequential set of institutions in the U.S. federal government. OIGs are non-partisan, politically independent offices that conduct valence-based oversight of the executive branch, issuing reports and recommendations aimed at minimizing waste and fraud in federal agency operations. Although they are housed in the executive branch, OIGs are unique in that they have a dual reporting role to both the head of their agency and Congress and also substantial statutory independence from their parent agencies, such as through their separate appropriations accounts and the requirement of advance congressional notification before their removal. OIGs are useful for examining this debate, as their role is very much focused on correcting policy valence instead of ideological 'drift'. Notably, OIGs have no policymaking powers of their own and can only issue recommendations to agencies. Therefore, if ideological/partisan motivations explain patterns of congressional interactions with OIGs, it provides strong evidence of ideological/partisan incentives' ability to explain patterns of congressional oversight as a whole, as members of Congress are less incentivized to pursue partisan/ideological goals through OIG oversight compared to other means of oversight, such as committee hearings.

In this paper, I present a theory of how members of Congress are incentivized by ideological/partisan incentives to manipulate OIGs' auditing agenda and capacity in accordance with the broader political environment. I leverage OIG budget authority data and non-statutory directives to both OIGs and their parent agencies in appropriations committee reports to test this theory and assess if members of Congress prioritize partisanship/ideological disagreements over policy valence or other considerations in their oversight of the executive branch, even through avenues that focus specifically on correcting policy valence.

Congressional Oversight

The elected representatives of Congress and their body of staffers are responsible for writing the laws of the federal government. However, Congress, as an institution, does not have the capacity or expertise to write all laws for a country of over 300 million people with an annual GDP of over 25 trillion USD. This has led to significant delegation of policy-making powers to the executive branch, including the President and federal agencies. Many federal regulations are written by federal agencies through the federal rulemaking process, with these statutes having the same legal standing as those written by Congress.[2] With delegation, Congress runs the risk of federal agencies drifting from Congress's preferences, whether it be preferences over the ideological location of policy or preferences over the efficiency/quality of implementation of policy, i.e. policy valence.

To minimize this issue of policy drift, Congress turns to oversight, which is defined by McCubbins and Schwartz as actions taken by Congress to "detect and remedy executive-branch violations of legislative goals" (1984). These legislative goals, drawing from canonical conceptualizations of the goals of members of Congress (Fenno 1973, Mayhew 2004), can include both the implementation of policy congruent with a member's ideological preferences and efficient implementation of policy more generally. Congress has a number of oversight 'tools' at their disposal—some of these oversight mechanisms are 'formal' in that they require significant coordination between multiple members of Congress, such as the design of statutes (Huber and Shipan 2002), committee hearings (Aberbach 1990, Mayhew 1991, Kriner and L. Schwartz 2008, McGrath 2013, Parker and Dull 2013) and limitation riders (Macdonald 2010), but others are more informal and require the involvement of as little as one member of Congress, such as private communications with federal agencies (Lowande 2018, Ritchie 2018, Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019, Ritchie and You 2019, Ritchie 2023), comments on federal rules (Lowande and Potter 2021), and non-statutory directives in appropriations reports (Bolton 2022). The use of oversight tools may be, in part, dictated by congressional capacity and legislative gridlock, as more formal methods of oversight may be unfeasible when ideological divisions within, and between, chambers of Congress and the President paralyze the lawmaking process and capacity constraints force members of Congress to pursue less costly and more informal means of overseeing the executive branch (McGrath 2013, Bolton 2022).

[2]The modern federal rulemaking process was standardized with the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946. Worth noting here is that there are even more instances of informal rulemaking by federal agencies that, although not having the same legal authority as federal statutes, still shape behavior and compliance amongst regulated parties (Parrillo 2019, Potter 2020).

A salient question in the congressional oversight literature is whether partisanship and ideological disagreements[3] or policy valence predict patterns of oversight frequency and intensity by Congress, both at the committee level and the individual level. The theoretical reasoning for both perspectives is relatively straightforward—Congress cares about their policies being implemented in accordance with their preferences, both ideological and valence, yet Congress has limited resources with which to conduct oversight, therefore Congress will prioritize 'correcting'[4] the dimension of their preferences that maximizes their utility, which will manifest in empirical patterns of oversight behavior.

Much of the literature examining this question uses committee hearings as the unit of analysis—this is due to the relative abundance of data availability on this topic and the 'formalized' nature of these hearings vis-a-vis other forms of oversight. Mayhew, in his book examining the effects of party division Congress on congressional investigations, studies a selected sample of high-profile congressional investigations of executive branch misdeeds, in-line with the operationalization of oversight from McCubbins and Schwartz, and finds no effect of party division on oversight (1991), which was subsequently contradicted by Kriner and Schwartz's study that finds a significant increase in the number and duration of committee hearings when shifting from unified to divided government (2008). Kriner and Schwartz chalk up the difference in part to data availability, as they are able to match committee hearings with broader congressional investigations.

Recent advances in data availability have allowed for the empirical study of other, more informal and/or private, oversight tools, with some papers seconding the assertion that partisanship/ideology predict oversight activity (Lowande and Potter 2021, Bolton 2022) and others finding little evidence to support said assertion. Lowande, in his paper examining private communications between members of Congress and federal agencies,

[3]For the purposes of this paper, I do not delve into theoretical distinctions between partisan-motivated and ideology-motivated oversight, as partisanship and ideology are highly correlated in modern American politics and I am more interested in comparing these motivations with valence-based motivations for oversight.

[4]Scholars debate over whether congressional oversight more closely fits a model of 'fire-alarm' or 'police patrol' oversight, i.e. whether Congress conducts oversight reactively or proactively (McCubbins and T. Schwartz 1984,Lupia and McCubbins 1994). This paper does not take a stance on which model is 'correct', though the mechanisms through which Congress can oversee agencies using agency OIGs discussed later in this paper could plausibly fall into either model of oversight.

finds no effect of ideological divergence on oversight and posits that electoral incentives are the main reason why ideological divergence is predictive of oversight in public-facing oversight venues (2018). Ritchie, also examining private communications, finds that senators facing conflicting political pressures from their constituents and their party pursue policy goals in private as a means of 'hiding' potentially unpopular actions from their constituents, implying that partisan and ideological concerns can drive oversight in private venues, just in a different way than in public venues (2018).

In sum, the literature has not settled on one, concise answer for what motivates congressional oversight. It appears as though valence and ideological/partisan concerns differentially drive oversight based on how public-facing the mechanism of oversight is, but more work can be done in this area, particularly when it comes to clarifying the conditions under which ideology does, or does not, matter in explaining oversight. This paper aims to contribute to this question by examining Offices of Inspector General, a set of important oversight institutions whose oversight of federal agencies are primarily focused on correcting policy valence, and how Congress attempts to exercise control of the oversight capacity and agenda of these offices to further their own oversight goals.

Congress and Offices of Inspector General

Members of Congress are not alone in conducting oversight of the executive branch. They are supported by congressional staffers who gather information in preparation for committee hearings, congressional support organizations such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Congressional Research Service (CRS), as well as the topic of this paper—Offices of Inspector General (OIG). OIGs are an important set of institutions whose main role is to conduct oversight of the executive branch, specifically with an eye towards reducing waste and fraud in government spending. Unlike the aforementioned congressional support organizations, OIGs are housed in the executive branch, giving them more 'on-the-ground' expertise of federal agency operations and a unique dual-reporting role to both Congress and the head of their agency. These institutions have their roots in the 1970's and 1980's, with many cabinet-level OIGs being formed after the passage of the Inspector General Act of 1978 (IG Act), which laid the framework for the modern OIG institution (Wilhelm 2023). OIGs are headed by an Inspector General (IG), a non-partisan, ostensibly politically independent official that is either nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate, or directly appointed by the head of the agency under the OIG's jurisdiction.[5]

According to a Congressional Research Service report, the IG Act specifies three main purposes for Inspectors General—

1. "Conduct audits and investigations of programs and operations of their affiliated federal entities;[6]

2. "Recommend policies that promote the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of agency programs and operations, as well as preventing and detecting waste, fraud, and abuse;

3. "Keep the affiliated entity head and Congress "fully and currently informed" of fraud and "other serious problems, abuses, and deficiencies" in such programs and operations, as well as progress in implementing related corrective actions." (Wilhelm 2023)

While part of the job of an Inspector General is to recommend policies to their agency and Congress, these policies are largely geared towards improving the efficiency of agency operations and programs and not towards pushing a specific ideological vision of what the agency should be doing. To illustrate this, below is a directive to the Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review by the House Appropriations Committee.

> *Management of cases and appeals.*—The Committee is aware that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) in an October 2012 report (I-2013-001) recommended

[5]These two methods of appointment are commonly referred to as PAS (Presidential Appointment and Senate Confirmation) and DFE (stands for Designated Federal Entity, refers to IGs that are appointed directly by agency heads). Most high-profile federal agencies, including all cabinet-level agencies and most large independent agencies, have PAS IGs.

[6]'Affiliated Federal Entities' are departments or offices under the scope of a given OIG. Most OIGs cover one specific federal agency, but a few cover more than one agency, such as the EPA OIG's jurisdiction including the Chemical Safety Board, and a few agencies have more than one OIG, such as the Department of Treasury with the Treasury OIG and the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration that covers the IRS.

> ways to streamline immigration hearing proceedings, specifically the need for consistent tracking mechanisms that avoid double counting cases which occur when a person is transferred between jurisdictions to a different IJ team. The Committee directs EOIR to brief the Committee not later than 90 days after enactment of this Act on the status of the implementation of these recommendations. (Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill House Appropriations Committee Report, May 27th, 2015)

This directive is notable for a few reasons—it was issued by a Republican-led House against a Democratic administration and is related to immigration, a hot-button political issue at the time where Republicans and Democrats held different policy positions. There were incentives for the OIG to recommend, for example, increasing the number of deportations or leaning away from prosecuting certain types of immigrants to satisfy the ideological leanings of their political principals. However, the specific recommendations given by the OIG in the report were focused on improving the efficiency of the existing immigration hearing process, rather than advocating for an ideological vision of what immigration hearings should look like.[7]

OIGs and outside observers often quantify their 'value' to politicians and taxpayers by measuring how many dollars of taxpayer money are saved through implemented OIG recommendations relative to the taxpayer dollars spent on the OIG. A report by the Brookings Institute calculated that the mean return on investment for OIGs from 2010-2014 was 13.41, meaning every taxpayer dollar spent on an OIG saved taxpayers $13.41 in return (Hudak and Wallack 2015). This positive return on investment is often cited by Inspectors General to justify their continued operation, both to politicians and the public (Barrón-López and Popat 2025).

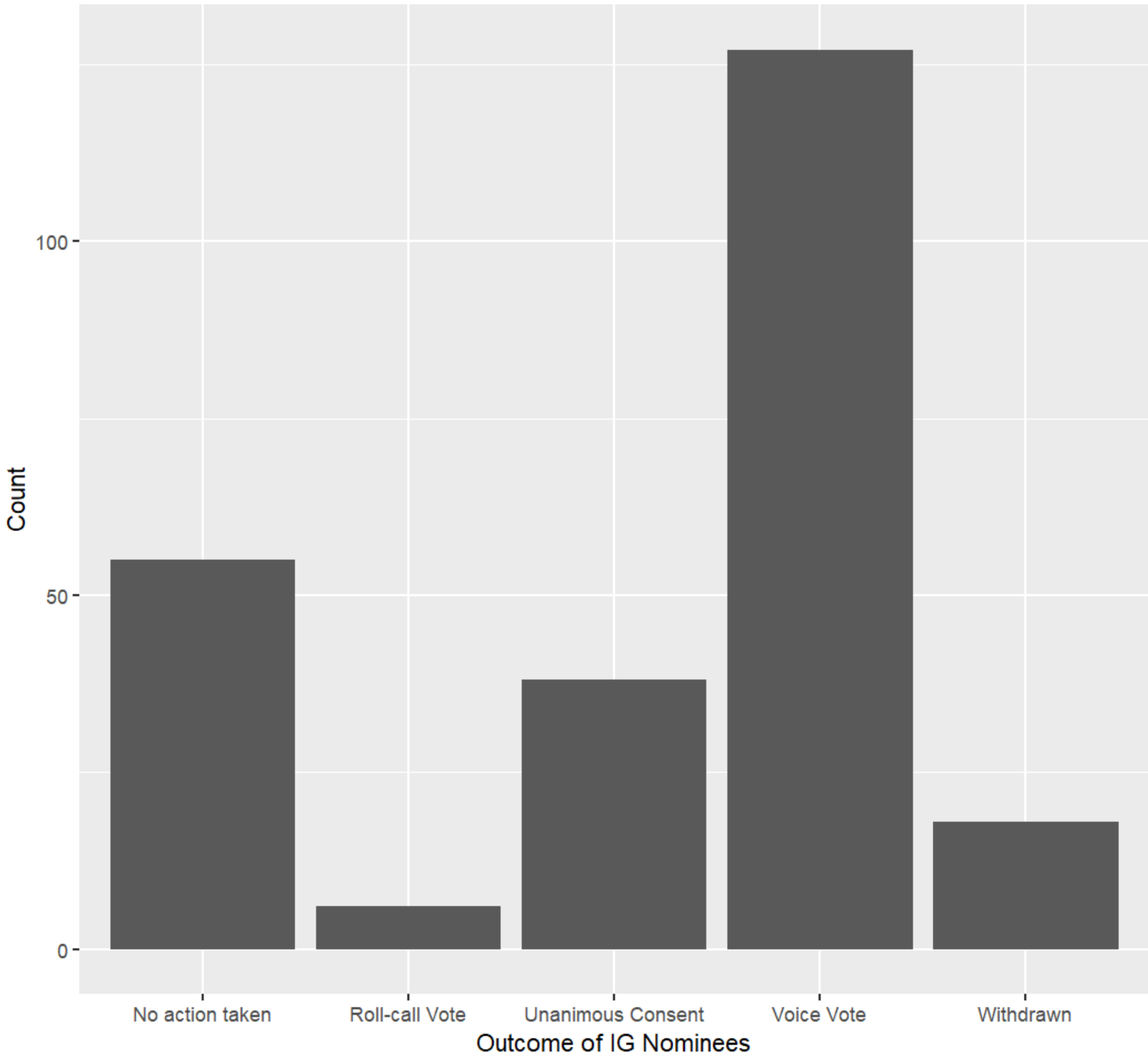
Support for Inspectors General has also been a traditionally bipartisan point of agreement among members of Congress, pointing to their success at establishing and maintaining a non-partisan image among policymakers. The IG Act received overwhelming

[7] The bulk of the recommendations in the report were aimed at improving the speed of immigration case processing, such as through improved data collection and developing standards that would help guide immigration judges in deciding whether or not to grant continuances.

bipartisan support, recording only 6 no votes from House members in its only roll-call vote in Congress, and subsequent bills expanding the powers and independence of Inspectors General[8] have also passed their chambers with little to no dissent (Wilhelm 2023). Likewise, support for Inspector General nominees has also been highly bipartisan—Figure 1 shows the distribution of outcomes for nominees for these offices, and of the 244 nominees in the data obtained from congress.gov, only 6 had roll-call votes on confirmation, and of those, only 3 faced any significant opposition. Worth noting is that these are just the nominees for agencies with PAS (Presidentially-appointed and Senate confirmed) Inspectors General, which are typically the agencies with the largest budgets and the most policy-making power, thus being where we would expect to see the greatest amount of partisan/ideological divisions on IG nominees. The lack of significant partisan/ideological divisions on both IG nominees and bills expanding the powers of OIGs is evidence consistent with OIGs being an institution that conducts oversight primarily targeted at correcting policy valence.

[8]These acts include the Inspector General Act Amendments of 1988, which established a separate appropriations account for OIGs and expanded the number of IGs, the Inspector General Reform Act of 2008, which created the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE), an oversight agency for Inspectors General, as well as the Inspector General Empowerment Act of 2016, which enhanced IG access to data and records from federal agencies. These acts were passed under both Republican and Democratic administrations and Congresses.

Figure 1: Outcomes of PAS Inspector General nominees (1981-2025)



Political Motives for Non-Ideological Oversight

If OIGs are strictly non-ideological, non-partisan agents of efficiency in the federal government, how can Congress use OIGs to pursue their political goals? I posit that members of Congress are incentivized to manipulate the capacity and oversight agenda of OIGs in accordance with the political environment. I then present three methods that Congress can use to achieve their oversight goals using OIGs—OIG budget manipulation, directives to OIGs to investigate specific issues, and directives to federal agencies to implement OIG recommendations—and draw empirical predictions for each method that are consistent with a world in which members of Congress use OIG oversight to pursue their political goals, particularly reducing ideological policy drift between Congress and federal agencies.

One reason that members of Congress may want to manipulate OIGs is that OIG reports can be politically damaging—if an agency is revealed to be wasting taxpayer dollars or engaging in corrupt or illegal behavior, it calls into question the competence of the agency and could potentially lead to the resignation of high-ranking agency officials. For example, former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke, who served at the start of the first Trump administration, resigned prematurely after repeated criticism over his improper expenditures in office, such as expensive charter flights and helicopter rides, and his real estate dealings (Eilperin, Dawsey, and Fears 2018). According to a Washington Post article, "...the key moment in his loss of support at the White House came in October, when Interior's inspector general referred one of its inquiries to the Justice Department" (2018). Although the reports issued by the Department of Interior's OIG did not immediately cause Zinke's resignation, the investigations conducted by the OIG significantly contributed to his political downfall.

The negative effects of a scathing report can have significant political consequences and give the presidential out-party material to cast their opponents as corrupt and fraudulent. When Ryan Zinke ran for the House of Representatives in Montana in 2022, his Democratic opponent, Monica Tranel, made frequent reference to his OIG investigations on the campaign trail, featuring the controversy in one of her TV advertisements. Even if the blowback doesn't directly implicate members of Congress, such as the current Representative Zinke, the electoral fates of members of Congress are increasingly tied to the popularity of the current President and their administration (Lee 2008), giving members of Congress electoral incentives to manipulate OIGs in a way that increases/decreases the chances of damaging reports being published depending on their partisan alignment with the President. Kempf and Cabrera also provide some empirical evidence that the political environment affects the generation of OIG reports, as their paper on the independence of OIGs finds that divided government increases the number of audit reports generated by OIGs (2019).

Beyond electoral incentives and partisan alignment with the President, members of Congress may also have preferences for which agencies they would like to conduct the most oversight of based on an agency's 'secular' ideology.[9] OIG investigations are sometimes initiated by request from members of Congress (Wilhelm 2023), and these requests can come from laws, appropriations reports, and even private communications. I posit that agencies, knowing that there is some probability that OIG oversight was personally requested by a member of Congress, will see an increase in OIG oversight as a signal of increased congressional interest in overseeing that specific agency's operations. This signal that the agency is potentially being 'watched' by Congress will update the beliefs of agency bureaucrats of their likelihood of being punished for deviating from Congress's preferences, not just for the specific policy area being investigated by the OIG at that given moment. Crucially, I posit that this chilling effect will reduce policy drift in both the valence and ideology dimensions, even if the OIG's investigation is only focusing on correcting policy valence, because of this aforementioned belief in the probability of punishment given the level of oversight. This indirect mechanism of reducing ideological drift will benefit members of Congress the most if their ideological preferences are far apart from the agency, thus making OIG oversight intensity more beneficial as the ideological distance between agencies and members of Congress increases.

This mechanism also produces theoretical expectations for when members of Congress will prefer increases in OIG oversight based on how politicized a federal agency is. Agency politicization is a concept that captures the degree to which outside political forces, particularly the President, have influence in the operations of federal agencies, including policymaking. Politicization has been found to bias agencies towards presidential co-partisans (Lowande 2019) and reduce agency performance and expertise (Wood and David E Lewis 2017, Richardson 2019), giving members of Congress of the opposite party of the President increased motivation to pursue OIG oversight in hopes of combating both valence and ideological policy drift. However, if ideology does not motivate congressional oversight,

[9] An agency's secular ideology is the perceived left-right ideological leanings of an agency and its personnel, irrespective of the party of the President/head of the agency (Richardson, Clinton, and David E. Lewis 2018). For example, the EPA, an agency that focuses on environmental regulations, is commonly perceived as an ideologically liberal agency, even when the head of the EPA is a Republican.

there should be no differential effects on OIG manipulation based on partisan alignment with the President.

The two parties, thus far, have been treated as the same re: their incentives to conduct oversight, including through OIG manipulation. However, Republicans in Congress, having stronger preferences for lower government spending than their Democratic counterparts, may find OIG oversight more valuable than Democrats in Congress because of the money saved through the adoption of OIG recommendations by federal agencies. This does not necessarily mean that Republicans necessarily value policy valence higher than Democrats, it merely means that the taxpayer dollars saved through the adoption of OIG recommendations also achieve an ideological goal of Republicans that they hold in higher regard than Democrats, relatively speaking.

Despite OIG oversight primarily focusing on correcting policy valence, there are several ways in which controlling OIG oversight can achieve the political goals of members of Congress, such as their electoral goals and their ideological policy goals. Partisan opposition to the President, ideological distance from an agency, and identifying with the Republican Party will increase the demand for OIG oversight, and politicization will increase the demand for OIG oversight when in opposition to the President.

How can members of Congress utilize and manipulate OIG oversight for these aforementioned political goals if they have significant statutory independence and aren't even housed in the same branch of government? I posit that there are two routes for Congress to manipulate the oversight agendas of OIGs—one budget-based, one directives-based. The first route involves manipulating the budgets of OIGs to either expand or contract their capacity for oversight. Oversight is costly in a quite literal sense, with OIGs requiring significant sums of money to hire and retain personnel with the time and expertise to conduct audits and write reports. Drolc examines the determinants of the diversity of OIGs' oversight agenda and finds that an increase in OIG budgets leads to an increase in the issue-area diversity of the oversight agenda (Drolc 2020). A Brookings Institute report also warns of the potential dangers that cutting OIG budgets may have on their oversight capacity, ironically having the potential to grow federal deficits through budget cuts (Hudak and Wallack 2015). Congress, as the body responsible for appropriating money to federal agencies, has the opportunity to strategically manipulate the budgets of OIGs to either increase or decrease their capacity to conduct oversight, thus resulting in a higher/lower likelihood of a damaging OIG report being published, all else held equal.

While adjusting OIG budgets can expand or contract the oversight agenda, it is an imperfect tool for controlling agency oversight as there is no direct manipulation of what OIGs conduct oversight of. Congress does have a more direct way of controlling OIG oversight—instead of indirectly controlling the agenda of oversight through manipulating capacity, Congress can direct Inspectors General to conduct oversight on specific issues. Unlike OIG budgets, these directives do not have to be written in statute to go into effect, thus reducing the barriers to directing the OIG agenda for Congress.

A related method of utilizing OIG oversight to push Congress's oversight goals, without directly controlling the oversight agenda of OIGs, is through directives to agencies to implement OIG policy recommendations. OIG reports usually have specific policy recommendations that aim to reduce inefficiencies and waste in government operations. OIGs keep track of which recommendations have been implemented in their semi-annual report to Congress, giving Congress specific info about how many recommendations have been given, how many have been implemented, and, if applicable, how much money is projected to be saved by implemented recommendations.

Although these directives are non-statutory, thus not legally binding, both Inspectors General and federal agencies are strongly incentivized to comply with these directives as Congress can punish them with a reduction in their budget or, in the case of agencies, increased constraints on their policy-making power. Both types of directives can also produce the aforementioned chilling effect, reducing both ideological and valence drift from Congress's preferences out of fear of punishment from Congress.

This paper will analyze these two categories of directives given in appropriations reports, a significant source of non-statutory directives that push Congress's policy goals and constrain the executive branch (Bolton 2022), and the annual budgets of OIGs. All three of these methods of OIG control can further the political goals of Congress through the two aforementioned mechanisms: reducing policy drift on both ideological & valence dimensions through the chilling effect induced by increased oversight scrutiny, and increasing/decreasing the capacity of OIG offices to conduct oversight and produce oversight reports, thus furthering the re-election goals of members of Congress.

The analysis of these methods of oversight also add onto work examining the independence of OIGs (Kempf and Cabrera 2019. By testing the effect of the political environment on actions by Congress, rather than down-stream OIG investigative outcomes, this paper is able to parse out the motivations of congressional influence of OIGs and the mechanisms by which Congress exerts its influence.

Table 1: Political Predictors of OIG Oversight Control

Political Predictors	Methods of OIG Control		
	OIG Budgets	OIG Investigation Orders	Orders to Implement OIG Recommendations
Presidential Out-party	+	+	+
Agency Politicization	N/A	N/A	N/A
Out-party x Politicization	+	+	+
Congress-Agency Ideological Congruence	-	-	-
Republican	+	+	+

Table 1 presents the empirical predictions for these three methods of OIG oversight control that are consistent with Congress using OIG oversight to achieve their political goals. If the empirical results match these predictions, it will be strong evidence that members of Congress are ideologically-motivated in conducting oversight of the executive branch. Null effects, alongside a stand-alone positive effect for agency politicization given its known negative effects on agency efficacy (Wood and David E Lewis 2017, Richardson 2019), would be indicative of members of Congress being primarily motivated by valence-based oversight, at least when it comes to using OIGs as agents to conduct executive branch oversight.

Research Design

To assess the empirical predictions in Table 1, I estimate a series of fixed-effects regression models using data from a variety of sources, including newly collected data on non-statutory directives from appropriations reports. Agency and OIG annual budget authority data is sourced from the Office of Management and Budget, with budget numbers adjusted using GDP data from the World Bank to control for inflation. I choose to analyze budget authority[10] because I am interested in the strategic decision-making that Congress engages in when appropriating money for OIGs. Hammond and Rosenstiel present a critique of using budget outlays to assess the political determinants of the federal budget, as it can take years for authorized money to be spent, making it difficult to connect spending to any particular set of political variables observed at time t (Hammond and Rosenstiel 2020). Budget authority data reduces measurement error, relative to budget outlays, when assessing the effects of the political environment on appropriations.

To assess the political predictors of OIG budgets, I construct agency politicization measures using federal employment data from the Office of Personnel Management. I use the politicization measure developed by Lewis, which is the ratio of PAS, non-career SES and Schedule C managers to total managers within a given federal agency (David E. Lewis 2008). For agency ideology, I use survey-based ideology scores that measure the extent to which observers view the agency as being ideologically conservative or liberal, regardless of who the current president is (Clinton and David E. Lewis 2008, Richardson, Clinton, and David E. Lewis 2018). I simplify the ideology scores to whether an agency is more liberal or conservative than 0 and interact it with the party in control of each chamber of Congress, producing a measure of ideological congruence. As appropriations are a product of the legislative process, involving input from both chambers of Congress, I include variables for both the House and Senate's ideological congruence with a given agency, as well as variables for whether each chamber is controlled by Republicans to assess the prediction

[10]Budget authority refers to money that is authorized by Congress through the appropriations process. This money is available to be spent by a federal agency after entering into a legal agreement to spend the money, known as an obligation.

that Republicans uniformly prefer OIG oversight more than Democrats. I also include two variables that measure the number of chambers of Congress controlled by the party in opposition to the current President, with Divided Chambers capturing when 1 chamber is in opposition and 1 is aligned and Fully Divided capturing when both chambers are in opposition to the President. Finally, I control for the logged agency budget authority within a given year to rule out any mechanical explanations for variation in OIG budgets, as OIG budget manipulation only really works as a strategy for constraining their oversight agenda if OIG budgets shrink relative to the overall agency budget.

I estimate two regression models for OIG budgets, both with Agency and President fixed effects and with standard errors clustered by year. There may be reason to believe that mandatory spending, such as Social Security and Medicaid, has less room for fraud and waste due to their simplistic distribution process compared to discretionary spending, which can encompass large government projects that can face significant cost overruns. To account for the potential differences in mandatory and discretionary spending, the first model controls for overall agency budget authority and the second model controls for discretionary agency budget authority. The results of these regression models are presented in Tables 2 and 3, and alternative specifications of these models without President fixed effects are presented in the appendix.

For the other two methods of OIG oversight control, I hand-coded instances of the two categories of directives in House and Senate appropriations reports, summing up the counts for each Agency-Year pair. Below, I present examples of each type of directive to explain my coding methodology.

> *Grants management.*—The Committee's recommendation also includes an increase of $2,000,000 for enhanced auditing and oversight of the Department's grant programs. In the execution of these funds, the Committee urges OIG to include a focus on financial management issues at the Office of Justice Programs (OJP). The Committee is particularly interested in assessing OJP's ability to track the disbursement of its appropriations by activity. (Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill House Appropria-

> tions Committee Report, June 12th, 2009)

This is an example of a non-statutory directive to an OIG to conduct an investigation. In this case, the committee is directing the Department of Justice OIG to investigate the granting process at the Office of Justice Programs, a sub-office of the Department of Justice. Although the committee uses softer language such as 'urges' instead of 'directed', the committee is nonetheless communicating its preference that the DOJ OIG investigate a specific policy issue in a specific sub-agency of the Department of Justice. This is how Congress can directly structure the oversight agenda of OIGs, reflecting their interest in OIG oversight.

> *Chemawa Indian School.*—The Committee is highly concerned with the findings included in the recent audit published by the Department's Office of Inspector General regarding the financial oversight and management of the Chemawa School in Oregon. Therefore, the Committee directs the Bureau to brief the Committee within 30 days of enactment of this act on how the Bureau intends to address the issues raised and implement the recommendations included in the audit. (Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill Senate Appropriations Committee Report, July 27th, 2023)

This is an example of a non-statutory directive to an agency to implement OIG recommendations. This directive is for the Department of the Interior to implement the recommendations issued in a DOI OIG report raising red flags about the financial governance of a Native American boarding school. The most common form of these directives, like the one above, are not explicit orders to implement the OIG's recommendations, but are instead orders for these agencies to give the Committee a report on its progress in implementing the recommendations. I argue that these still count as implicit directives, as the agency risks punishment by either not producing a report or producing a report with unsatisfactory progress towards implementing the recommendations, thus incentivizing the agency to act on the OIG recommendations.

Both of these categories of directives often reoccur from year-to-year. Therefore, the presence of, for example, 5 directives to the EPA in both 2006 and 2007 does not necessarily mean 5 unique directives for each year. However, the repeated inclusion, and subsequent dropping, of these directives is still informative about the relative intensity of oversight that Congress wants the OIGs to conduct for each agency.

I use the counts of these directives for a subset of agencies in this preliminary analysis[11] to assess the same aforementioned empirical predictors in Table 1. However, unlike the OIG budget analysis, this analysis will be conducted at the chamber-year unit of analysis, leveraging the production of appropriations reports by both the House and Senate appropriations committees. I also control for the number of OIG reports per agency issued in the year preceding the appropriations report as a measure of the supply of OIG recommendations. The results for the analysis are presented below in Tables 4 and 5, with alternative specifications listed in the Appendix.

[11] I have directives data from 2005 to 2023 for the following agencies: Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of the Interior, and the Department of Transportation. However, some chambers did not issue appropriations reports for certain years, so there is not complete coverage of both the House and Senate within the years listed above for each of these agencies. I plan to expand the scope of this analysis to more agencies as I collect more data.

Table 2: Estimating the Effects of Partisanship & Agency Characteristics on OIG Budget Authority (2005-2022)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Repub. House	-0.058*				-0.030*	-0.028*
	(0.022)				(0.011)	(0.010)
Repub. Senate	-0.000				-0.030	-0.030
	(0.041)				(0.044)	(0.044)
Divided Chambers		0.022			0.012	-0.016
		(0.022)			(0.012)	(0.015)
Fully Divided		0.091+			0.094*	0.087+
		(0.044)			(0.043)	(0.045)
Agency Politicization			-0.190		-0.811	-1.924
			(1.641)		(1.630)	(2.114)
House-Agency Ideological Alignment				0.016+	0.016+	0.018+
				(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Senate-Agency Ideological Alignment				-0.002	0.005	0.003
				(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Divided Chambers x Politicization						2.024+
						(1.070)
Fully Divided x Politicization						0.545
						(1.064)
log Agency Budget	0.082***	0.086***	0.090***	0.089***	0.080***	0.079***
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Observations	444	444	444	444	444	444
R^2	0.978	0.978	0.978	0.978	0.979	0.979
R^2 Within	0.112	0.123	0.093	0.100	0.145	0.153
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: $^{+}p<0.1$; $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$
Standard errors are clustered by year.

Table 3: Estimating the Effects of Partisanship & Agency Characteristics on OIG Budget Authority, controlling for Discretionary Agency Budget Authority (2005-2022)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Repub. House	-0.074**				-0.055**	-0.047**
	(0.023)				(0.014)	(0.014)
Repub. Senate	-0.001				-0.020	-0.019
	(0.040)				(0.042)	(0.042)
Divided Chambers		0.024			0.020	-0.038
		(0.027)			(0.020)	(0.023)
Fully Divided		0.099*			0.099*	0.074
		(0.042)			(0.038)	(0.044)
Agency Politicization			-1.159		-1.860	-4.479
			(2.252)		(2.269)	(2.695)
House-Agency Ideological Alignment				0.006	0.003	0.009
				(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Senate-Agency Ideological Alignment				-0.002	0.006	0.001
				(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.010)
Divided Chambers x Politicization						4.194*
						(1.747)
Fully Divided x Politicization						1.692
						(1.320)
log Discretionary Agency Budget	0.173***	0.177***	0.188***	0.189***	0.159***	0.159***
	(0.023)	(0.021)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Observations	443	443	443	443	443	443
R^2	0.976	0.976	0.975	0.975	0.977	0.978
R^2 Within	0.141	0.144	0.117	0.116	0.170	0.203
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: $^{+}p<0.1$; $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$
Standard errors are clustered by year.

Although there is some evidence consistent with the empirical predictions laid out in Table 1, such as fully divided government increasing OIG budgets and the interaction between divided chambers and agency politicization increasing OIG budgets, the effects are largely statistically null. Curiously, there is a significant decrease in OIG budgets when the House of Representatives is controlled by Republicans, opposite of the prediction. A potential explanation for this result is that Republicans derive greater electoral benefits from government mismanagement than Democrats due to their strong small government policy stances, thus encouraging them to gimp valence-based oversight from OIGs, even if it means increasing government deficits. This explanation is consistent with the actions taken by Newt Gingrich after the 1994 Republican Revolution in which Republicans took control of the House after 40+ years in opposition. Upon taking control, the new Republican majority proceeded to eliminate the Office of Technology Assessment, a congressional support organization akin to the Government Accountability Office and Congressional Research Service that provided policy-relevant information about emerging technologies, and slashed committee staff, the class of staffers in Congress most likely to assist in conducting oversight of the executive branch, from roughly 2000 to 1300 in the House of Representatives[12], all in spite of Gingrich's Republicans being in partisan opposition to President Clinton, which would imply a desire to increase oversight capacity instead of decreasing it (Baumgartner and Drutman 2016, Ban, Park, and You 2023, Petersen 2023).

[12] Although this decline in committee staff is not fully replicated in the Senate, the proportion of committee staff to overall staff in the Senate has declined, falling from 23.39% in 1987 to a low of 17.49% in 1995 immediately following the Republican Revolution, according to a CRS report on Senate staffing (Petersen and Wolanin 2023).

Table 4: Effects of Partisanship and Agency Characteristics on orders to implement OIG recommendations (2005-2024)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	-0.119				-0.199*	-0.198*
	(0.074)				(0.070)	(0.069)
Opposition to President		0.097			0.057	0.094
		(0.150)			(0.138)	(0.230)
Agency Politicization			29.983		29.942	31.559
			(25.803)		(29.158)	(29.330)
Chamber-Agency Ideological Alignment				0.019	-0.108	-0.105
				(0.080)	(0.090)	(0.092)
Senate					0.063	0.063
					(0.160)	(0.161)
Opposition to President x Politicization						-3.003
						(16.620)
OIG Reports $t-1$	-0.002	-0.002	-0.002	-0.002	-0.002	-0.002
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	209	209	209	209	209	209
R^2	0.198	0.192	0.196	0.191	0.207	0.207
R^2 Within	0.013	0.007	0.011	0.006	0.024	0.024
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: $^{+}$p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors are clustered by year.

Table 5: Effects of Partisanship and Agency Characteristics on orders to OIG to conduct investigation (2005-2024)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	-0.106				-0.291	-0.295
	(0.093)				(0.240)	(0.243)
Opposition to President		-0.006			-0.052	-0.145
		(0.196)			(0.254)	(0.340)
Agency Politicization			3.734		4.668	0.555
			(20.817)		(25.817)	(27.106)
Chamber-Agency Ideological Alignment				-0.071	-0.284	-0.292
				(0.097)	(0.262)	(0.266)
Senate					0.071	0.070
					(0.093)	(0.095)
Opposition to President x Politicization						7.641
						(15.648)
OIG Reports $t-1$	-0.001	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	209	209	209	209	209	209
R^2	0.322	0.316	0.317	0.319	0.340	0.341
R^2 Within	0.008	0.000	0.001	0.004	0.035	0.036
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: $^{+}$p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors are clustered by year.

The results in Tables 4 and 5 tell a similar story to the OIG budget analysis, with Republicans issuing significantly fewer orders to agencies to implement OIG recommendations and null results for all other political predictors. The patterns presented are congruent with evidence from Tables 2 and 3 that Republicans prefer less OIG oversight than Democrats, and the significant negative effect of Republican control on orders to implement OIG recommendations specifically is interesting because it indicates that Republicans are secularly less interested in agencies following the recommendations of OIGs, despite their stronger political preferences for smaller government than Democrats. Although most other political predictors are null, the evidence doesn't appear to be suggestive that valence is the only motivator of congressional OIG directives, as the loss in efficacy induced by politicization does not lead to an increase in either category of directives. This analysis is preliminary, so these results could change as more data is collected, but as it stands, it appears that there is evidence of ideology and partisanship-motivated manipulation of OIG oversight, though not in the way hypothesized earlier in the paper.

Discussion

OIGs, as agents tasked with conducting oversight aimed at correcting policy valence, present a compelling opportunity for analyzing the motives of congressional oversight, as members of Congress have a myriad of partisan and ideological motivations to exert control over OIG oversight. The results in this paper indicate that there are patterns of political motivations behind OIG control, though not in the way hypothesized earlier in the paper. Rather, the evidence suggests that, regardless of the President's party or the political characteristics of the agency, Republicans prefer less oversight than Democrats, at least from OIGs. This is different from the ideological motivations posited in other congressional oversight papers, which typically find divided government and/or agency political characteristics to be significant predictors of oversight frequency and intensity.

I posit that, because OIGs are primarily focused on correcting policy valence, the results points towards something interacting with Republicans' preferences for policy valence. Evidence from the institutional development of Congress over the past 30 years, including the elimination of the Office of Technology Assessment and the decline in committee staff, the staff most likely to assist in conducting oversight of the executive branch, is congruent with this perspective on differential preferences for policy valence. One potential explanation is that Republicans, having an ideological preference for a smaller government, benefit electorally from an inefficient/wasteful federal government, as it provides campaign material that they can use to win votes to their side, and are therefore less interested in conducting valence-based oversight than Democrats. This is, in part, congruent with most attempted removals of Inspectors General coming from Republican presidents, specifically Reagan and Trump (Barrón-López and Popat 2025). This has troubling normative implications for the continued functioning of the executive branch and important implications for the literature on congressional oversight, presenting an alternative perspective on how ideology and partisanship can motivate congressional oversight.

In future versions of this paper, I plan on expanding the scope of the empirical analysis, collecting data from more appropriations reports for more agencies, and expanding the empirical analysis to other sources of congressional directives to OIGs, including congressional correspondence logs from the various OIGs in the federal government obtained through FOIA requests. The correspondence logs will be particularly valuable, as they will allow the tracking of OIG oversight preferences down to the individual member level, instead of the chamber level in the present analysis. I also plan on examining variation within these OIG directive categories in appropriations reports, such as examining when Congress mandates a report in conjunction with an order to implement OIG recommendations as a measure of the intensity of the preference for oversight.

Appendix

Table 6: Estimating the Effects of Partisanship & Agency Characteristics on OIG Budget Authority (2005-2022)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Repub. House	-0.090*				-0.120**	-0.115**
	(0.034)				(0.036)	(0.035)
Repub. Senate	0.016				0.074+	0.070
	(0.032)				(0.042)	(0.042)
Divided Chambers		0.001			0.027	-0.013
		(0.047)			(0.037)	(0.035)
Fully Divided		-0.008			0.005	-0.013
		(0.057)			(0.054)	(0.053)
Agency Politicization			-1.978		-2.166	-3.830
			(2.103)		(2.141)	(2.593)
House-Agency Ideological Alignment				0.025*	0.014	0.017
				(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Senate-Agency Ideological Alignment				-0.005	0.003	0.001
				(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Republican President					-0.079	-0.077
					(0.054)	(0.053)
Divided Chambers x Politicization						2.778*
						(1.140)
Fully Divided x Politicization						1.423
						(1.105)
log Agency Budget	0.102***	0.121***	0.121***	0.118***	0.095***	0.094***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Observations	444	444	444	444	444	444
R^2	0.975	0.974	0.974	0.974	0.976	0.976
R^2 Within	0.185	0.146	0.151	0.159	0.222	0.233
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects						

Note: $^{+}p<0.1$; $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$
Standard errors are clustered by year.

Table 7: Estimating the Effects of Partisanship & Agency Characteristics on OIG Budget Authority, controlling for Discretionary Agency Budget Authority (2005-2022)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Repub. House	-0.107*				-0.155**	-0.140**
	(0.040)				(0.044)	(0.040)
Repub. Senate	0.015				0.101*	0.090*
	(0.035)				(0.037)	(0.036)
Divided Chambers		0.009			0.041	-0.035
		(0.055)			(0.042)	(0.035)
Fully Divided		-0.016			-0.000	-0.031
		(0.055)			(0.049)	(0.047)
Agency Politicization			-2.937		-3.286	-6.190+
			(2.848)		(2.772)	(3.212)
House-Agency Ideological Alignment				0.013	-0.000	0.007
				(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Senate-Agency Ideological Alignment				-0.005	0.005	-0.000
				(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Republican President					-0.105*	-0.101+
					(0.049)	(0.049)
Divided Chambers x Politicization						4.829*
						(1.941)
Fully Divided x Politicization						2.349
						(1.532)
log Discretionary Agency Budget	0.195***	0.231***	0.225***	0.226***	0.189***	0.189***
	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.025)
Observations	443	443	443	443	443	443
R^2	0.972	0.970	0.970	0.970	0.974	0.975
R^2 Within	0.193	0.146	0.156	0.148	0.246	0.282
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects						

Note: $^{+}$p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors are clustered by year.

Table 8: Effects of Partisanship and Agency Characteristics on orders to implement OIG recommendations (2005-2024)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	-0.121				-0.217**	-0.216**
	(0.078)				(0.066)	(0.067)
Opposition to President		0.041			-0.015	-0.000
		(0.150)			(0.151)	(0.221)
Agency Politicization			21.315		25.499	26.144
			(26.239)		(27.090)	(27.465)
Chamber-Agency Ideological Alignment				0.024	-0.123+	-0.122
				(0.075)	(0.070)	(0.072)
Senate					-0.010	-0.010
					(0.163)	(0.163)
Opposition to President x Politicization						-1.238
						(16.552)
OIG Reports $t-1$	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	209	209	209	209	209	209
R^2	0.187	0.180	0.182	0.180	0.194	0.194
R^2 Within	0.012	0.004	0.006	0.004	0.021	0.021
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects						

Note: $^{+}p<0.1$; $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$
Standard errors are clustered by year.

Table 9: Effects of Partisanship and Agency Characteristics on orders to OIG to conduct investigation (2005-2024)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	-0.082				-0.265	-0.267
	(0.095)				(0.277)	(0.280)
Opposition to President		0.093			0.057	-0.004
		(0.178)			(0.194)	(0.294)
Agency Politicization			13.734		11.241	8.634
			(22.884)		(24.420)	(25.516)
Chamber-Agency Ideological Alignment				-0.076	-0.263	-0.268
				(0.087)	(0.290)	(0.294)
Senate					0.180*	0.180*
					(0.085)	(0.085)
Opposition to President x Politicization						5.011
						(15.339)
OIG Reports $t-1$	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	209	209	209	209	209	209
R^2	0.289	0.287	0.287	0.289	0.312	0.312
R^2 Within	0.007	0.004	0.004	0.006	0.039	0.039
Agency Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
President Fixed Effects						

Note: $^{+}$p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors are clustered by year.

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