

# Limits on Terms, Limits on Control: The Effect of Chief Executive Term Limits on Bureaucratic Responsiveness

David R. Miller  
American University  
[dmiller@american.edu](mailto:dmiller@american.edu)

Daniel M. Butler  
Washington University in St. Louis  
[daniel.butler@gmail.com](mailto:daniel.butler@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Term limits for elected officials are often advocated to enhance responsiveness to constituents. We argue however, that they can weaken executive power by reducing bureaucratic deference. Using an experimental survey of state bureaucrats across nine U.S. states, we investigate the impact of gubernatorial term limits on bureaucratic effort and prioritization of executive preferences. Our findings reveal that bureaucrats exert less effort and place lower importance on the preferences of term-limited governors compared to those at the beginning of their term or running for re-election. While these effects are statistically significant, they are modest in size. Additionally, bureaucrats also minimize the preferences of agency directors appointed by term-limited governors. These findings suggest that gubernatorial term limits erode executive influence by undermining bureaucratic responsiveness, a critical channel of policymaking authority.

Government reform advocates and the public often promote term limits for government officials to make them more responsive to voters and reduce the influence of special interests.<sup>1</sup> However, research indicates that term limits generate pernicious effects such as officials putting less effort into representing their constituents, policymaking, and oversight (Fouirnaies and Hall 2022, Sarbaugh-Thompson et al. 2011); greater deference to the executive branch (Butcher 2023, Kousser 2005); greater reliance on outside actors for information and expertise (Butcher 2023, Moncrief and Thompson 2001); and higher levels of polarization in the institutions with term limits (Olson and Rogowski 2020). While the most studies focus on legislators, other officials, such as chief executives, are also term limited; in fact, at the federal and state level, more jurisdictions impose term limits on chief executives than legislators. For example, while the president and 36 of 50 state governors face term limits, members of Congress do not and only 16 state legislatures have term limits.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, existing research on executive term limits often focuses on behaviors we study with respect to legislators, such as their effort and policy outputs (Alt et al. 2011; Besley and Case 1995; Ferraz and Finan 2011), while neglecting the consequences of term limits on functions unique to executives, like managing the bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup>

We expand our understanding of the effects of term limits by examining how they shape the chief executive's ability to induce bureaucrats to follow directives. In almost all cases—even when acting unilaterally—chief executives need bureaucrats to act on their behalf to effectuate their preferences (Neustadt 1991, Rudalevige 2021). We argue that bureaucrats are less responsive

---

<sup>1</sup> Lopez, Ashley. “Term limits for Congress are wildly popular. But most experts say they’d be a bad idea.” National Public Radio, October 29, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/29/1207593168/congressional-term-limits-explainer>.

<sup>2</sup> “Provisions for the Number of Consecutive Terms.” *The Book of the States*, 2023 Edition, <https://bookofthestates.org/tables/2022-4-9/>; “The Term-Limited States.” National Conference of State Legislatures, August 3, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/the-term-limited-states>.

<sup>3</sup> An important exception is work at the international level that explores how term limits conditions executives’ propensity to engage in interstate conflict (Carter and Nordstrom 2017; Ziegler et al 2014).

to term-limited executives because of their shorter time horizon (Heclo 1977; Lewis 2009). Bureaucrats, anticipating longer tenures than term-limited executives, can resist initiatives likely to change with new leadership, avoid implementing disagreeable policies, and expect less oversight and sanctioning from a departing executive. We evaluate our expectation with an experiment embedded in a survey of bureaucrats in nine US states that assesses how the presence of a gubernatorial term limit affects their responsiveness to a gubernatorial executive order issued. Our results show that bureaucrats are somewhat less responsive to a term-limited governor's directives, with modest effect sizes. These results indicate that term limits influence not only how officials represent the public, but also how others in government respond to term-limited officials.

Our work has significant implications for scholars and practitioners considering the utility of term limits. First, while research on “lame duck” executives often focuses on their decreasing influence with legislators (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Cockerham 2021; Light 1999), our findings expand the scope of this declining influence to include executive branch subordinates on whom executives rely to achieve their policies. Second, this research highlights that term limits have varied impacts on officials based on their roles and institutional context, suggesting the need for more studies on non-legislative officials. Third, our findings raise concerns about bureaucratic legitimacy. Because bureaucrats are not elected, they are largely accountable to the public through the oversight relationships they have with elected officials (Kagan 2000, Rogowski 2020). If bureaucrats are less responsive to term-limited chief executives, this accountability may weaken.

### **Disincentives for Bureaucratic Responsiveness to Term-Limited Chief Executives**

Among their myriad responsibilities, chief executives are charged with directing the conduct of the bureaucracy (Ferguson 2013; Lewis and Moe 2010). As the single unitary actor atop government functions in most jurisdictions, chief executives are “held accountable for the

broad performance of their agencies,” and “an executive decision is the decision of the individual politician” in the eyes of the public (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002, 315). This responsibility motivates chief executives to ensure the bureaucracy performs efficiently and fulfills its obligations to stakeholders and the public. Additionally, chief executives use the bureaucracy to influence policymaking by appointing like-minded officials, issuing unilateral directives, and intervening in the regulatory process (Lewis 2008; Rudalevige 2021; Yackee Forthcoming). Consequently, chief executives seek to establish and maintain control over the bureaucracy.

While bureaucrats are hierarchically accountable to chief executives, they often have some discretion in carrying out their duties and deviate from the executives’ intentions. In deciding whether and how to “shirk” the chief executive, bureaucrats often take cues from the political environment, including the preferences of coworkers, agency superiors, legislators, and outside stakeholders like interest groups and the public (Brehm and Gates 1999; Palus and Yackee 2022; Waterman, Rouse, and Wright 1998; Whitford 2005). Term limits can serve as one such cue, shaping bureaucrats’ expectations about the duration of the chief executive’s influence (Heclo 1977; Lewis 2009). Bureaucrats often enjoy civil service protections and can serve for decades, giving them a long-term approach to policy. In contrast, chief executives’ time horizons are often shorter because they need to deliver on policy to satisfy a myopic public (Fiorina 1981; Kriner and Reeves 2015; Lowande 2024). Term limits exacerbate this disjuncture between executives’ time horizons and those of bureaucrats. When bureaucrats know with certainty that the chief executive will depart in the near-term, they may become less willing to respond to their directives.

Research on executive branch politics highlights at least three ways discrepancies in time horizons between term-limited chief executives and bureaucrats can produce misaligned incentives that reduce bureaucratic responsiveness to executives. First, term limits reduce uncertainty about

how long an incumbent executive will serve but increase uncertainty about policy initiatives undertaken in her final term. With their longer time horizons, bureaucrats typically hold “gradualism” mindsets where they prioritize making sure programs continue working over making sudden and dramatic changes that could prompt disruptions (Helco 1977: 142-148). When term-limited chief executives initiate new policies, bureaucrats recognize that their successors could easily rescind those policies or stop supporting them. For instance, newly-inaugurated presidents often upend the directives of their predecessors by revoking executive orders (Thrower 2017) or delaying the implementation of regulations (Thrower 2018). When directives are reversed, the effort bureaucrats exerted to implement them essentially goes to waste, presenting an affront to the core public administration value of efficiency (Rutger and van der Meer 2010). Because term-limited executives cannot ensure their directives will remain once they leave office, bureaucrats should be less responsive to those directives.

Second, if a bureaucrat disagrees with a term-limited executive’s directive, they may be able to obstruct implementation until the executive leaves office. The processes by which executives’ policies are codified and implemented often take substantial time; the average time to final adoption for rules that go through the regulatory process is 4 months in US states (Boushey and McGrath 2024) and 15 months at the federal level (Potter 2017). Further, bureaucrats enjoy significant procedural discretion to delay policies, such as deciding the extent of cost-benefit analyses and interagency coordination they conduct or simply the speed with which they compile documents and move them through the process. Existing research indicates that bureaucrats routinely use dilatory tactics to slow-roll policies when their preferences diverge from those of their political bosses, such as chief executives, in hope that future political environments will be more aligned to their preferences (Potter 2017, Rudalevige 2021). By providing firm turnover

dates for chief executives, term limits encourage bureaucrats to be less responsive to directives they oppose.

Third, it is harder for term-limited chief executives to detect and sanction noncompliance by bureaucrats. As noted above, designing and implementing policies takes a significant amount of time, so term-limited executives who pursue new initiatives might not witness their full execution before they leave office—at which point they lose all oversight power—and bureaucrats can strategically delay to make this outcome more likely (Potter 2017, Rudalevige 2021). Further, as term-limited executives scramble to accomplish as much as possible as their terms close, their ability to detect shirking erodes. For instance, Bolton et al. (2016) demonstrate that in the “midnight” period of presidents’ terms (i.e., the time between the November election and January 20 of the following year), the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) decreases the length of time it spends reviewing final rules, suggesting presidents and their political appointees are less able to identify and address bureaucrats’ deviations from presidents’ intentions. Additionally, even if term-limited executives catch bureaucratic shirking, their diminishing political capital makes it harder to sanction non-compliance; for example, given that presidents and governors lose influence with their legislatures as their final terms progress, shirking bureaucrats may anticipate that their legislative principals would shield them from or push back on coercive action from the executive (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Cockerham 2021; Light 1999). Because term-limited executives are less able to observe and sanction bureaucratic shirking, we expect bureaucrats are less responsive to their directives.

These rationales prompt a general expectation that bureaucrats are less responsive to term-limited chief executives relative to those eligible for re-election. This expectation informs two pre-registered hypotheses: bureaucrats exert less effort in implementing term-limited executives’

directives (H1) and bureaucrats place less weight on the executives' preferences in the implementation process (H2). These two outcomes reflect different aspects of bureaucrats' responsiveness, as effort reflects the time and energy spent to manifest the policy, while weight placed on the executives' preferences reflects how closely bureaucrats align policy implementation with the executives' intentions.

## **Research Design**

Extant scholarship on term limits often uses quais-experimental designs by comparing jurisdictions that have adopted or rescinded term limits to those that have not (e.g., Alt et al. 2011; Fournaies and Hall 2022; Olson and Rogowski 2020). These quasi-experimental designs require publicly observable outcomes, such as state government expenditures or the number of bills legislators sponsor. However, evaluating bureaucratic compliance with executive directives is challenging because this information is typically neither publicly observable nor comparable across jurisdictions. While some executive directives are public, such as executive orders, many others are made out of public view. Even when directives are public, executives and their advisers typically communicate informal guidance and expectations to the bureaucrats charged with carrying them out (e.g., Rudalevige 2021). Consequently, it is difficult for observers to evaluate implementation outcomes and determine how they correspond to the executives' intentions. Additionally, the scope, complexity, policy areas, and expected outputs of executive directives vary greatly, making consistent assessment of bureaucratic responsiveness challenging. For example, presidents' directives can range from straightforward topics with objectively measurable outcomes like setting a minimum wage for federal contractors,<sup>4</sup> to controversial issues that are

---

<sup>4</sup> "Executive Order on Increasing the Minimum Wage for Federal Contractors." *The White House*, April 27, 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/04/27/executive-order-on-increasing-the-minimum-wage-for-federal-contractors/>.

hard to track such as authorizing the removal and relocation of US residents deemed national security threats.<sup>5</sup> Measuring responsiveness to such varied directives is difficult, making an observational approach to assessing the effect of executive term limits on bureaucratic responsiveness impracticable.

As an alternative, we use an experimental approach that exposes bureaucrats to a stylized executive directive and randomly varies whether that executive is term-limited. Our approach constructs a controlled context where responsiveness to the directive is observable, measurable, and comparable across respondents. It also allows us to identify causal effects of term limits as previous approaches have striven to do (e.g., Alt et al. 2011; Fouirnaies and Hall 2022; Olson and Rogowski 2020).

#### *Survey and Experimental Protocol*

We embedded our pre-registered experiment in a survey of state bureaucrats in nine U.S. states fielded between May 31 and June 26, 2024.<sup>6</sup> The sampling frame for the survey was all state government employees in the following states whose email addresses were posted publicly in state employee directories: Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, and Vermont. Out of the 219,103 individuals invited to participate, 2,542 responded to at least one of the two outcome questions in our experiment, leading to a response rate of 1.2% (2,542/219,103).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> While Executive Order 9066 does not make explicit what persons President Franklin Delano Roosevelt intended to be subject to removal and relocation, the historical record demonstrates that the order was intended to and in effect did target persons of Japanese ancestry (“Executive Order 9066: Resulting in Japanese-American Incarceration (1942).” *National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066>).

<sup>6</sup> Our pre-registration documentation is available through the Open Science Framework ([https://osf.io/rd6bs/?view\\_only=37e2d6d0fdc346b2ac035d0c3d6be0cc](https://osf.io/rd6bs/?view_only=37e2d6d0fdc346b2ac035d0c3d6be0cc)). Please see the Supplemental Information for details about the demographic characteristics of the sample.

<sup>7</sup> Please see Supplemental Information Section B for more information on the selection of states, collection of email addresses, and descriptive statistics of respondents.

After respondents answered questions about their personal and professional characteristics, we presented them with a vignette about a stylized governor's executive order (see Box 1 for vignette and question wording). The vignette asked respondents to imagine working for a state agency similar to where they currently work in but in a different state.<sup>8</sup> They were informed that the state's governor issued an executive order to enhance environmental sustainability and their job was to manage their agency's response to the procurement part of the order.<sup>9</sup> The key manipulation is what we told respondents about the governor's tenure. One third of respondents read that the governor had just started their term, indicating the longest possible time horizon (we use this as our baseline condition). Another third read that the governor is running for re-election this year, implying an uncertain time horizon since they could either win or lose. The final third read that the governor is in their final year and cannot seek re-election due to term limits, indicating that their time horizon is certain to be short. By varying the perceived tenure of the governor, we assess how bureaucratic responsiveness changes with the certainty of an executive's limited time in office.

#### **Box 1. Vignette and Question Wording**

Imagine you are working in a state agency that is similar to the one you work in now, but in a different state. Your role in this agency is to oversee procurement (purchasing/contracting for goods and services for your agency).

The governor of your state, who [started their term this year/is running for re-election this year/is in their final year in office and cannot seek re-election due to term limits], recently issued an executive order directing all state agencies to devise plans to enhance environmental sustainability. Part of the executive order requires agencies to enhance sustainability in procurement by making sure products purchased:

- contain recycled materials
- are free of toxic and hazardous chemicals

<sup>8</sup> In giving this instruction, we sought to encourage respondents to separate their idiosyncratic experiences from working in their own state governments, such as interactions they have had with their own governor and staff from the governor's office, from how they interpreted the vignette.

<sup>9</sup> We chose to focus the vignette and questions respondents were asked to consider on procurement because it is a common bureaucratic function with which all respondents should have at least some familiarity, even if only through procuring supplies and equipment for themselves.

- conserve energy and water
- minimize waste and packaging

Your job requires you to manage your agency's response to the governor's executive order as it pertains to procurement.

In light of the governor's executive order, how much effort would you plan to put into the following activities? (RESPONSE OPTIONS: "No effort" "Little effort" "Some effort" "A great deal of effort")

- Auditing how sustainable goods routinely purchased by the agency are
- Seeking out more sustainable alternatives that the agency could purchase
- Educating other agency employees about promoting sustainability in procurement
- Reviewing new purchase orders to make sure the goods listed are sustainable

When planning how to respond to the governor's executive order, how important would the preferences of the following stakeholders be in your decision-making process? (RESPONSE OPTIONS: "Not at all important" "Slightly important" "Somewhat important" "Very important" "Extremely important")

- The governor
- The director of your agency
- The employees of your agency
- The state legislature
- Interest groups
- The residents of your state

Following the vignette, we asked respondents two sets of questions. In the first set, respondents indicated on a four-point scale how much effort they would allocate to four activities that would advance the governor's executive order. Following our pre-analysis plan, we averaged the responses to these four questions to create an effort index to test H1—that term limits reduce the effort bureaucrats exert on executives' directives. In the second set of questions, respondents used a five-point scale to rate how important the preferences of various stakeholders would be when implementing the governor's executive order. We use respondents' answer to their rating regarding the governor test H2—that term limits reduce the weight bureaucrats place on executives' preferences when carrying out their directives.

## Results

We use linear regression to assess the impact of the governor's tenure information on respondents' responsiveness to the executive order. We present the treatment effects for *Implementation Effort Exerted* and *Importance of Governor's Preferences* in the left and right panes of Figure 1, respectively. First, focusing on *Implementation Effort Exerted*, we observe that, consistent with H1, respondents informed that the governor is term-limited would exert less effort on the executive order than would respondents told the governor just started their term (the baseline condition) or is running for re-election. Although this effect is statistically distinguishable from zero, it is substantively small; as our effort index ranges from 1 to 4 with a mean value of 3.38 and standard deviation of 0.64, the -0.06 effect associated with the governor being term-limited represents an effect roughly equal to only one-tenth of a standard deviation. Thus, bureaucrats serving under a term-limited governor are still willing to exert between "some effort" and "a great deal of effort" (the labels associated with values of 3 and 4 on our four-point scale) on implementing the executive order, but this level of effort is marginally lower than that of bureaucrats serving under a governor either at the start of their term or running for re-election.

#### **[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

Turning to *Importance of Governor's Preferences*, we find support for H2. The respondents told that the governor is running for re-election or is term-limited would both place less weight on the governor's preferences when implementing the executive order (relative to the baseline), with the treatment effect associated with a term-limited governor (-0.31) being distinguishably larger than the effect associated with a governor running for re-election (-0.13). With a mean of 3.80 and a standard deviation of 1.16 for this measure, the treatment effect corresponds to a quarter standard deviation shift. Although this shift is larger than that observed for *Implementation Effort Exerted*, it remains relatively modest. Bureaucrats in the term-limited

condition still consider the governor’s preferences to be between “somewhat important” and “very important” (the labels associated with values of 3 and 4 on our five-point scale).

In exploratory analyses, we also examined the effects of our treatments on the importance respondents placed on the other stakeholders—the director of the agency, the agency’s employees, the state legislature, interest groups, and state residents (see Table SI.4). Among these stakeholders, the term-limited treatment manifests a statistically distinguishable effect for only the agency director (-0.10). While this effect is smaller than that associated with the governor’s preferences, it offers additional support for H2 because, as most agency directors are appointed by and serve at the pleasure of state governors, respondents could reasonably infer that the agency director appointed by a term-limited governor would also soon leave office. Consequently, respondents felt they could assign less importance to the preferences of a term-limited governor’s appointee.

Our experimental design does not allow us to assess the relative credibility of each of the three proposed mechanisms we provided. However, we are able to test the plausibility of the second mechanism—bureaucrats’ policy disagreement with the governor. Because the policy content of the stylized executive order—environmental sustainability—is starkly polarized along partisan lines (e.g., Dunlap et al. 2016), respondents who identify as more Democratic are likely more supportive of the order than are respondents who are more Republican. Thus, we perform an exploratory test of our policy disagreement mechanism by interacting respondents’ party identification (self-reported on a seven-point scale) with our treatment indicators. Our results, presented in Table SI.5, provide no evidence that Republican respondents exhibit larger term-limited treatment effects than Democratic respondents, suggesting that, in this particular context, bureaucrats’ disagreement with the term-limited governor’s policy may not drive the overall

treatment effects we observe. However, our inability to reject the null hypothesis is not dispositive, and future research should probe the plausibility of these mechanisms linking executive term limits to decreased bureaucratic responsiveness.

## Conclusion

While many pundits, advocates, and members of the public push for term limits to enhance elected officials' responsiveness to their constituents' preferences, this study finds that term limits actually *diminish* a different kind of responsiveness—that of bureaucrats to their chief executives. This adverse impact on bureaucratic responsiveness has downstream consequences for the very constituents term limits are intended to benefit. Since elected principals of bureaucrats, such as chief executives, are the key pathway for bureaucratic accountability to voters (Kagan 2000, Rogowski 2020), executive term limits weaken this pathway, making it more difficult for the public to influence bureaucratic policymaking and implementation.

Although we detect negative effects of term limits on bureaucratic responsiveness, we acknowledge that those effects are modest in magnitude. As our study examines this link in a specific context, we encourage scholars to assess how these effects may shift when term-limited executives and their bureaucrats operate in different contexts. For example, while environmental sustainability is a polarized policy issue, it is not a high salience issue, and bureaucrats may be even less responsive when term-limited governors seek to implement policies concerning hot-button political issues—especially when they disagree on the topic. Similarly, the limited scope of our featured directive—procurement within state government—means it is unlikely to manifest in any policy consequences noticeable to other politicians, the media, stakeholders, or the public. However, if a directive could produce policy outcomes that would harm or attract

negative attention from those audiences, bureaucrats may be more resistant to follow it if the executive is term-limited.

Future work should also consider how term-limited executives might anticipate decreased responsiveness from bureaucrats. Knowing that their ability to influence the bureaucracy will decline, executives may prioritize maximizing their control over agencies likely to exhibit recalcitrance. For example, executives may ensure that all appointable positions are filled and they may “burrow” political appointees into the civil service system before they become ineligible for re-election (Lewis 2008). Executives may also take steps to augment responsiveness in other ways to counteract this natural decline, such as bolstering trust by making the agency feel it has sufficient support to fulfill its mission (Yang and Pandey 2009) or defending the agency against criticism for adverse policy outcomes (Miller and Reeves n.d.).

Finally, this paper should motivate scholars to devote more attention to elected executives in the study of term limits. While previous research on the effect of term limits for legislators about representation might also apply to executives since they are doing similar work (see Alt et al. 2011; Besley and Case 1995; Ferraz and Finan 2011), executives exercise many exclusive powers not yet fully explore in the context of term limits. In this paper, we consider one of these exclusive powers—executives’ ability to influence bureaucrats through directives—but many other exclusive powers remain to be explored. For example, term limits may affect the type and volume of pardons chief executives issue; once executives are ineligible for re-election and thus less accountable to the public, they may issue more pardons for more controversial offenses or individuals, such as political donors and allies. Additionally, with substantial control over grant administration (Kriner and Reeves 2015; Nicholson-Crotty 2015), term-limited executives may shift the focus of grant funding or prioritize grants with short timelines to fulfill

campaign promises before they leave office. Given the high number of chief executives subject to term limits, further research assessing the effect of those term limits on executive behavior is vital to understand how well our institutions facilitate responsiveness and accountability for executives and the political elites with whom they interact.

## References

- Alt, James E., Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, and Shanna Rose. 2011. "Disentangling Accountability and Competence in Elections: Evidence from U.S. Term Limits." *Journal of Politics*, 73 (1): 171–186.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, and James M. Snyder Jr. 2002. "The Incumbency Advantage in US Elections: An Analysis of State and Federal Offices, 1942–2000." *Election Law Journal* 1(3): 315-338.
- Barrett, Andrew W., and Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha. 2007. "Presidential Success on the Substance of Legislation." *Political Research Quarterly*, 60(1): 100-112.
- Besley, Timothy, and Anne Case. 1995. "Does Electoral Accountability Affect Economic Policy Choices? Evidence from Gubernatorial Term Limits." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 110 (3): 769–798.
- Bolton, Alexander, Rachel Augustine Potter, and Sharece Thrower. 2016. "Organizational Capacity, Regulatory Review, and the Limits of Political Control." *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*: 32(2): 242-271.
- Boushey, Graeme T., and Robert J. McGrath. 2024. "Rulemaking Speed in the US States." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 34(2): 284-300.

- Brehm, John O., and Scott Gates. 1999. *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public*. University of Michigan Press.
- Butcher, Jordan. 2023. *Navigating Term Limits: The Careers of State Legislators*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cockerham, Alexandra G. "Going it Alone: The Adverse Effect of Executive Term Limits on Bargaining." *State and Local Government Review*, 53(1): 62-77.
- Dunlap, Riley E., Aaron M. McCright, and Jerrod H. Yarosh. 2016. "The Political Divide on Climate Change: Partisan Polarization Widens in the US." *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 58(5): 4-23.
- Ferguson, Margaret. 2013. "The Governors and the Executive Branch." In Virginia Gray, Russell Hanson, & Thad Kousser (Eds.), *Politics in the American States: A Comparative Analysis*. 10th ed. Washington DC: CQ Press. pp. 194-231.
- Ferraz, Claudio, and Frederico Finan. 2011. "Electoral Accountability and Corruption: Evidence from the Audits of Local Governments." *American Economic Review*, 101(4): 1274–1311.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. Yale University Press.
- Fouirnaies, Alexander, and Andrew B. Hall. 2022. "How Do Electoral Incentives Affect Legislator Behavior? Evidence from U.S. State Legislatures." *American Political Science Review*, 116(2): 559–575.
- Heclo, Hugh. 1977. *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Kagan, Elena. 2000. "Presidential Administration." *Harvard Law Review*, 114(8): 2245–2385.

- Kousser, Thad. 2005. *Term Limits and the Dismantling of State Legislative Professionalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kriner, Douglas L. and Reeves, Andrew. 2015. *The particularistic president: Executive branch politics and political inequality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David E. 2008. *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance*. Princeton University Press.
- Lewis, David E. 2009. "Modern Presidents and the Transformation of the Federal Personnel System." *The Forum*, 7(4): 1-20.
- Lewis, David E. and Terry M. Moe. 2010. "The Presidency and the Bureaucracy: The Levers of Presidential Control." In Michael Nelson (Ed.), *The Presidency and the Political System*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington DC: CQ Press. 374-405.
- Light, Paul. 1999. *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Clinton*. JHU Press.
- Lowande, Kenneth. 2024. *False Front: The Failed Promise of Presidential Power in a Polarized Age*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kriner, Douglas L., and Andrew Reeves. 2015. *The Particularistic President: Executive Branch Politics and Political Inequality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, David R. and Andrew J. Reeves. n.d. "Blaming Bureaucrats: How Political Leadership Shapes Bureaucratic Trust and Engagement."
- Moncrief, Gary, and Joel A. Thompson. 1999. "On the Outside Looking in: Lobbyists' Perspectives on the Effects of State Legislative Term Limits." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 1(4): 394-411.

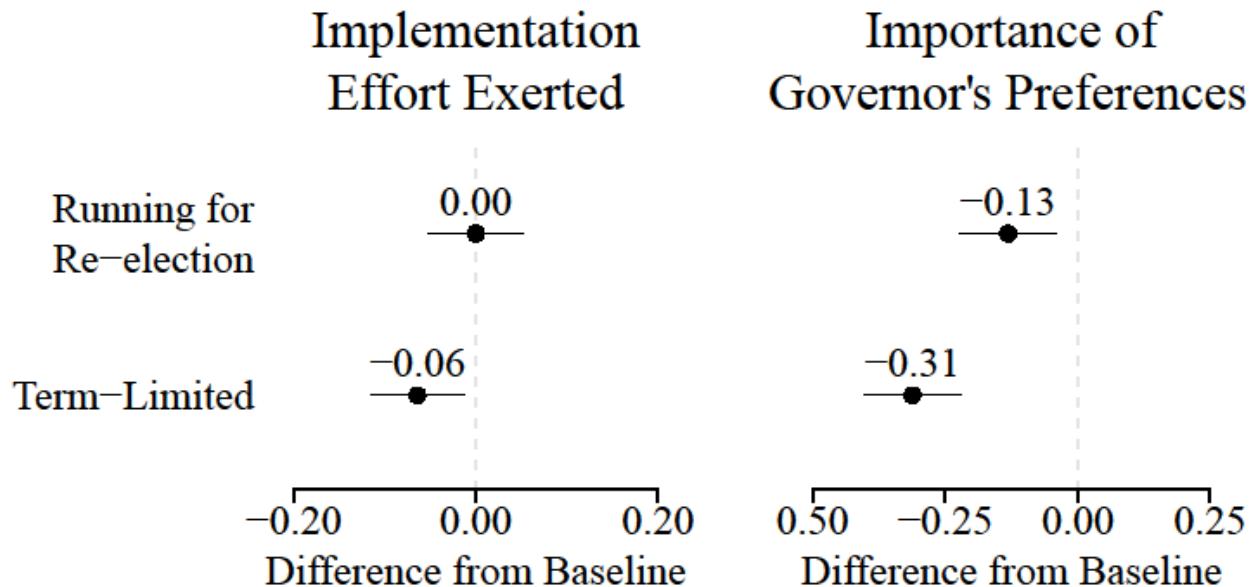
- Neustadt, Richard E. 1991. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Simon and Schuster.
- Nicholson-Crotty, S. 2015. *Governors, grants, and elections: Fiscal federalism in the American states*. JHU Press.
- Olson, Michael P., and Jon C. Rogowski. "Legislative Term Limits and Polarization." *Journal of Politics*, 82(2): 572-586.
- Palus, Christine K., and Susan W. Yackee. 2022. "When Does the Multiple Principals Hypothesis Hold? The Politics of US Agency Policymaking Autonomy." *Governance* 35(1): 43-64.
- Potter, Rachel Augustine. 2017. "Slow-rolling, Fast-tracking, and the Pace of Bureaucratic Decisions in Rulemaking." *Journal of Politics*, 79(3): 841-855.
- Rudalevige, Andrew. 2021. *By Executive Order: Bureaucratic Management and the Limits of Presidential Power*. Princeton University Press.
- Rutgers, Mark R., and Hendrikje Van Der Meer. 2010. "The Origins and Restriction of Efficiency in Public Administration: Regaining Efficiency as the Core Value of Public Administration." *Administration & Society*, 42(7): 755-779.
- Sarbaugh-Thompson, Marjorie, John Strate, Kelly Leroux, Richard C. Elling, Lyke Thompson, and Charles D. Elder. 2010. "Legislators and Administrators: Complex Relationships Complicated by Term Limits." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 35(1): 57-89.
- Thrower, Sharece. 2017. "To Revoke or Not Revoke? The Political Determinants of Executive Order Longevity." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(3): 642-656.
- Thrower, Sharece. 2018. "Policy Disruption Through Regulatory Delay in the Trump Administration." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48(3): 517-536.

Waterman, Richard W., Amelia Rouse, and Robert Wright. 1998. "The Venues of Influence: A New Theory of Political Control of the Bureaucracy." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 8(1): 13-38.

Whitford, Andrew B. 2005. "The Pursuit of Political Control by Multiple Principals." *Journal of Politics* 67(1): 29-49.

Yackee, Susan Webb. Forthcoming. "Executive Policymaking Influence via the Administrative Apparatus." *Public Administration Review*.

Yang, Kaifeng and Sanjay K. Pandey 2009. "How do perceived political environment and administrative reform affect employee commitment?" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 19(2):335–360.



**Figure 1: Effect of Governor's Tenure on Bureaucratic Responsiveness to Executive Order.** Points and lines in the left pane represent the difference in the amount of effort respondents in each of the treatment conditions indicated they would exert (measured on a four-point scale) relative to respondents in the baseline condition and the 95% confidence intervals (one-tailed) for those differences, respectively. Points and lines in the right pane represent the difference in the importance respondents in each of the treatment conditions indicated they would assign to the preferences of the governor in implementing the executive order (measured on a five-point scale) relative to respondents in the baseline condition and the 95% confidence intervals (one-tailed) for

those differences, respectively. Estimates obtained using ordinary least squares regression. See Supplemental Information Table SI.3 for a tabular presentation of the underlying regression models.

## **Supplemental Information**

### **Section A: Preregistration**

We preregistered our experimental design through the Open Science Framework on May 18, 2024 ([https://osf.io/rd6bs/?view\\_only=37e2d6d0fdc346b2ac035d0c3d6be0cc](https://osf.io/rd6bs/?view_only=37e2d6d0fdc346b2ac035d0c3d6be0cc)). As we analyzed our survey responses, we made one deviation from our preregistered design concerning which potential respondents in the sampling frame we solicited to participate in the survey. Namely, in our preregistration, we planned to randomly sample 25% of the email addresses we obtained from state employee directories. We made this design choice to balance both power considerations for all of the modules on the survey while not overburdening public employees.<sup>1</sup> The size of our random sample anticipated a response rate of between 5% and 10%, as reported in recent studies utilizing survey experiments with other elite populations (e.g., e.g., Furnas and LaPira 2024; Miller 2022), which would have yielded us approximately 2,600 to 5,200. However, 24 hours after distributing email invitations to the random sample, we observed a response rate of lower than 1%, which prompted concern that we would not obtain enough responses to conduct sufficiently powered analyses.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, we decided to send email invitations to all state government employees for which we collected email addresses.

### **Section B: Survey Protocol**

#### *Section B.1: Sampling Procedure*

The sampling frame for the survey in which the survey experiment was embedded was all state government employees in the following nine states whose email addresses were posted publicly in the employee directories of those states: Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, and Vermont.<sup>3</sup> In the first half of 2023, one

---

<sup>1</sup> Starting with the initial sample of 253,344 emails across the nine states, we considered two factors that would inform our expected response rate: 1) the expected turnover of state employees between the time the emails were collected in 2023 and the survey was fielded in 2024 and 2) observed response rates in other recent samples of political elites. First, based on reported turnover rates of states in our sample, we expected approximately 16% of employees in our sample to no longer be employed by their state rendering their email address invalid. Second, examining recent survey experiments of political elites, such as congressional staff and federal lobbyists, we anticipated a response rate of between 5% and 10% (e.g., Furnas and LaPira 2024; Miller 2022). Given these factors, we expected to collect approximately 2,600 to 5,200 responses.

<sup>2</sup> While it is difficult to understand systematic reasons for non-response, anecdotally we believe state government employees are not as responsive as other recently studied elite populations because they have been trained to be cautious when opening and interacting with emails sent from unfamiliar sources. Many potential respondents emailed the author who facilitated survey distribution asking for confirmation and/or evidence that the survey invitation was legitimate, and officials from the information technology (IT) offices of several state agencies called the author to assess whether the emails were associated with a cybersecurity risk. Additionally, several potential respondents informed the author that the policies set forth by their IT offices prevented them from participating, and others indicated that their IT offices send similar messages to “test” the employees’ compliance with agency policies. Separately, several potential respondents also told the author that their agency barred employees from completing outside surveys or participating in academic research unless the activities were pre-approved by the agency head.

<sup>3</sup> In late 2021, one of the authors surveyed the employee directories of all fifty states to determine whether the state posted publicly the email addresses of its employees publicly. At that time, 25 states provided such information publicly. From those 25 states, one of the authors selected a subset of states where it was most feasible to collect the

of the authors and student research assistants collected the emails from the directories of these states and formatted them into comma-separated files.

The total number of unique email addresses collected from these nine states is 252,316. Initial email invitations were sent to all unique email addresses between May 31 and June 3, 2024, and reminder emails were sent to all respondents that had not yet completed the survey on June 11 and June 18, 2024. Response collection ceased at the end of the day on June 26, 2024, at which point 2,542 respondents had provided an answer to at least one of the outcome questions in the experiment. Subtracting from the 33,213 emails which were returned as undeliverable, the response rate for this module is approximately 1.2% (2,542/219,103).

### *Section B.2 Vignette and Question Wording*

After responding to a pre-treatment question battery, respondents were prompted to imagine working in a state agency similar to the one they work in now, but in a different state, and that their role in the agency is to oversee procurement activities. Then, respondents were informed that the governor of the state recently issued an executive order concerning environmental sustainability, and that part of the order seeks to enhance sustainability in procurement. As their role in the agency is to oversee procurement, respondents are told that they are responsible for their agency's response to the parts of the executive order concerning procurement. The one component of the vignette that is randomized across respondents is the information provided about where the featured governor's tenure—whether they are in their first year in office, up for re-election this year, or in the final year of their term and cannot seek re-election. The wording of the vignette and the different treatments associated with each requirement are provided below.

#### *Section B.2.1 Vignette*

Imagine you are working in a state agency that is similar to the one you work in now, but in a different state. Your role in this agency is to oversee procurement (i.e., purchasing/contracting for goods and services for your agency).

The governor of the state, [INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOVERNOR'S TENURE], recently issued an executive order directing all state agencies to devise plans to enhance environmental sustainability. Part of the executive order requires agencies to enhance sustainability in procurement by making sure products purchased:

- contain recycled materials
- are free of toxic and hazardous chemicals
- conserve energy and water
- minimize waste and packaging

Your job requires you to manage your agency's response to the governor's executive order as it pertains to procurement.

#### *INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOVERNOR'S TENURE*

---

email addresses given the formatting of each state's directory and such that the subset would be representative across important state-level characteristics, such as geographic location and partisanship.

- BASELINE: who started their term this year
- RE-ELECTION: who is running for re-election this year
- TERM LIMITED: who is in the final year in office and cannot seek re-election due to term limits

#### *Section B.2.2 Question Wording*

1. In light of the governor's executive order, how much effort would you plan to put into the following activities? [RESPONSE OPTIONS FOR EACH ITEM: No effort, Little effort, Some effort, A great deal of effort]
  - Auditing the sustainability of goods routinely purchased by the agency
  - Seeking out more sustainable alternatives that the agency could purchase
  - Educating other agency employees about promoting sustainability in procurement
  - Reviewing new purchase orders to make sure the goods listed are sustainable
2. When planning how to respond to the governor's executive order, how important would the preferences of the following stakeholders be in your decision-making process? [RESPONSE OPTIONS FOR EACH ITEM: Not at all important, Slightly important, Somewhat important, Very important, Extremely important]
  - The governor
  - The director of your agency
  - The employees of your agency
  - The state legislature
  - Interest groups
  - The residents of your state

#### *Section B.3 Respondent Demographic Characteristics*

The only systematic information we were able to collect about state government employees in the full sampling frame was their names, email addresses, and the states by which they were employed.<sup>4</sup> We present information about survey responsiveness by state in Table SI.1.

For respondents who participated in our experiment, we collected information on a range of demographic characteristics pre-treatment. We provide information about the characteristics of our sample of respondents in Table SI.2.

**Table SI.1: Sampling Frame Response Rates by State**

| State       | # of respondents | # of employees invited to participate | Response rate |
|-------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| Connecticut | 189              | 11,929                                | 1.6%          |

<sup>4</sup> For some states, we were also able to collect information about the agency and/or office in which they worked and the physical address of their workplace. However, this information was not provided by all states and is not presented in a uniform format across states, so we are not able to use it in assessing sample representativeness.

|                |              |                |             |
|----------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| Florida        | 438          | 68,178         | 0.6%        |
| Illinois       | 29           | 1,840          | 1.6%        |
| Indiana        | 160          | 27,168         | 0.6%        |
| Nebraska       | 326          | 12,701         | 2.6%        |
| New Hampshire  | 23           | 8,898          | 0.3%        |
| North Carolina | 538          | 48,283         | 1.1%        |
| Oregon         | 744          | 36,460         | 2.0%        |
| Vermont        | 95           | 3,645          | 2.6%        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>2,542</b> | <b>219,103</b> | <b>1.2%</b> |

**Table SI.2: Respondent Demographic Characteristics**  
**# (%) of respondents**

| <b><u>Gender</u></b>           |              |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Male                           | 1145 (45.0%) |
| Female                         | 1340 (52.7%) |
| Something else/Other           | 28 (1.1%)    |
| Prefer not to say              | 25 (1.0%)    |
| NA                             | 4 (0.2%)     |
| <b><u>Age</u></b>              |              |
| 18-29                          | 136 (5.4%)   |
| 30-49                          | 1115 (43.9%) |
| 50-64                          | 1098 (43.2%) |
| 65 or older                    | 192 (7.6%)   |
| NA                             | 1 (0.0%)     |
| <b><u>Income</u></b>           |              |
| Less than \$25,000             | 7 (0.3%)     |
| \$25,000-\$49,999              | 219 (8.6%)   |
| \$50,000-\$74,999              | 462 (18.2%)  |
| \$75,000-\$99,999              | 497 (19.6%)  |
| \$100,000-\$199,999            | 1033 (40.6%) |
| \$200,000 or more              | 304 (12.0%)  |
| NA                             | 20 (0.8%)    |
| <b><u>Education</u></b>        |              |
| Some high school, or less      | 1 (0.0%)     |
| High school graduate or GED    | 80 (3.1%)    |
| Some college, no 4-year degree | 377 (14.8%)  |
| College graduate               | 925 (36.4%)  |
| Post-graduate degree           | 1155 (45.4%) |
| NA                             | 4 (0.2%)     |

**Race**

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| American Indian or Alaska Native          | 17 (0.7%)    |
| American Indian or other Pacific Islander | 10 (0.4%)    |
| Asian                                     | 64 (2.5%)    |
| Black or African American                 | 221 (8.7%)   |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander       | 5 (0.2%)     |
| Other                                     | 128 (5.0%)   |
| White                                     | 2018 (81.9%) |
| NA  | 16 (0.6%)    |

**Hispanic**

|                   |              |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Yes               | 159 (6.3%)   |
| No                | 2348 (92.4%) |
| Prefer not to say | 30 (1.2%)    |
| NA                | 5 (0.2%)     |

**Party Identification**

|                              |             |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| Strong Democrat              | 741 (32.2%) |
| Not a very strong Democrat   | 350 (13.8%) |
| Lean Democrat                | 301 (11.8%) |
| Independent                  | 251 (9.9%)  |
| Lean Republican              | 153 (6.0%)  |
| Not a very strong Republican | 219 (8.6%)  |
| Strong Republican            | 286 (11.3%) |
| Other/NA                     | 241 (9.5%)  |

**Ideology**

|                       |             |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| Very liberal          | 272 (10.7%) |
| Liberal               | 625 (24.6%) |
| Slightly liberal      | 328 (12.9%) |
| Moderate              | 632 (24.9%) |
| Slightly conservative | 199 (7.8%)  |
| Conservative          | 369 (14.5%) |
| Very conservative     | 106 (4.2%)  |
| NA                    | 11 (0.4%)   |

**Years of Experience in State****Government**

|                   |             |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Less than 5 years | 608 (23.9%) |
| 5-10 years        | 713 (28.0%) |
| 11-15 years       | 319 (12.5%) |

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| 16-20 years                                 | 297 (11.7%)  |
| More than 20 years                          | 602 (23.7%)  |
| NA  | 3 (0.1%)     |
| <b>Job Selection Method</b>                 |              |
| Appointed by elected official               | 89 (3.5%)    |
| Hired/promoted through civil service system | 2073 (81.5%) |
| Other                                       | 378 (14.9%)  |
| NA  | 2 (0.1%)     |

### Section C: Empirical Analysis

In this section, we present the tabular representations of the models underlying the figures in the main paper as well as tabular representations of exploratory analyses we describe in the main paper.

#### *Section C.1: Tabular Presentation of Results Presented in the Main Paper*

**Table SI.3: Effect of Governor's Tenure on Bureaucratic Responsiveness to Executive Order**

|                        | Implementation Effort Exerted | Importance of Governor's Preferences |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Intercept              | 3.40 *<br>(0.02)              | 3.95 *<br>(0.04)                     |
| Re-election Treatment  | 0.00<br>(0.03)                | -0.13 *<br>(0.06)                    |
| Term Limited Treatment | -0.06 *<br>(0.03)             | -0.31 *<br>(0.06)                    |
| Num. obs.              | 2523                          | 2526                                 |

Models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression. \* denotes statistical significance at the p<0.05 level (one-tailed). The dependent variable for the first model is an index that measures how much effort respondents would exert on implementing the governor's executive order measured on a four-point scale, and the dependent variable for the second model is a five-point scale that indicates how much importance respondents would assign to the governor's preferences in implementing the executive order.

#### *Section C.2: Tabular Presentation of Exploratory Analyses Discussed in the Main Paper*

**Table SI.4: Effect of Governor's Tenure on Importance Assigned to Preferences of Other Stakeholders**

|                       | Agency Director  | Agency Employees | State Legislature | Interest Groups  | State residents  |
|-----------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Intercept             | 4.12 *<br>(0.03) | 3.68 *<br>(0.03) | 3.30 *<br>(0.04)  | 2.76 *<br>(0.04) | 3.75 *<br>(0.04) |
| Re-election Treatment | -0.05<br>(0.05)  | 0.01<br>(0.05)   | 0.02<br>(0.06)    | 0.04<br>(0.06)   | 0.11 *<br>(0.05) |

|                        | Agency Director | Agency Employees | State Legislature Interest Groups | State residents |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Term Limited Treatment | -0.10 *         | -0.01            | -0.07                             | -0.08           |
|                        | (0.05)          | (0.05)           | (0.06)                            | (0.06)          |
| Num. obs.              | 2523            | 2520             | 2507                              | 2519            |
|                        |                 |                  |                                   | 2518            |

Models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression. \* denotes statistical significance at the p<0.05 level (one-tailed). The dependent variable for each model is a five-point scale that indicates how much importance respondents would assign to the preferences of the stakeholder identified in the column heading in implementing the governor's executive order on a five-point scale.

**Table SI.5: Effect of Governor's Tenure on Bureaucratic Responsiveness to Executive Order, Conditioned by Respondent Ideology**

|                        | Implementation Effort Exerted | Importance of Governor's Preferences |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Intercept              | 3.69 *                        | 3.93 *                               |
|                        | (0.05)                        | (0.09)                               |
| Re-election Treatment  | -0.02                         | 0.07                                 |
|                        | (0.07)                        | (0.13)                               |
| Term Limited Treatment | -0.02                         | -0.24 *                              |
|                        | (0.07)                        | (0.13)                               |
| Resp. Ideology (D→R)   | -0.08 *                       | 0.00                                 |
|                        | (0.01)                        | (0.02)                               |
| Re-election:Ideology   | 0.00                          | -0.06 *                              |
|                        | (0.02)                        | (0.03)                               |
| Term Limited:Ideology  | -0.01                         | -0.02                                |
|                        | (0.02)                        | (0.03)                               |
| Num. obs.              | 2512                          | 2516                                 |

Models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression. \* denotes statistical significance at the p<0.05 level (one-tailed). The dependent variable for the first model is an index that measures how much effort respondents would exert on implementing the governor's executive order measured on a four-point scale, and the dependent variable for the second model is a five-point scale that indicates how much importance respondents would assign to the governor's preferences in implementing the executive order. Respondent ideology is measured on a seven-point scale, where a value of 1 represents "very liberal" and a value of 7 represents "very conservative."

## References

- Furnas, Alexander C., and Timothy M. LaPira. 2024. "The People Think What I Think: False Consensus and Unelected Elite Misperception of Public Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science*, 68(3): 958-971.
- Miller, David R. "On Whose Door to Knock? Organized Interests' Strategic Pursuit of Access to Members of Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 47(1): 157-192.