# Acting(s) without Consequence: The (Lack of) Public Costs for Vacancies and Acting Officials*

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**Abstract**

While acting officials in federal agencies have become more common in recent years, presidents still utilize the traditional nomination process, which constrains presidents' choices, for most executive branch appointments. Recent work emphasizes presidents' incentives for using acting officials, but few scholars have considered what keeps presidents from using them even more often. We argue presidents' use of acting officials, like other forms of unilateral action, is constrained by public opinion; while actings may be expeditious policy tools for presidents, the public perceives them to undermine the executive branch's legitimacy and competence and punishes presidents accordingly. Through three survey experiments leveraging real-world instances of President Joe Biden's usage of acting officials, we find little evidence the public reacts negatively to acting officials in agency leadership. While some institutional forces must encourage presidents to seek senatorial advise and consent for their nominees, our evidence does not indicate public opinion provides that constraint.

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By February 2019, just over two years into his term as president, Donald Trump had replaced 10 of his 24 original Cabinet officials, with half of those vacated positions held by acting officials he appointed on a temporary basis without the Senate's advise and consent. When asked if he was comfortable with this turnover and the high number of acting officials, Trump responded, "It's easier to make moves when they're acting... I like acting because I can move so quickly. It gives me more flexibility."[1] While the frequency with which Trump utilized acting officials to fill Cabinet- and agency-level posts was unprecedented, all presidents in the modern era commonly utilize acting appointments (O'Connell 2020). Recent studies of executive branch vacancies argue presidents are often incentivized to forego the advise and consent process when vacancies occur because they can empower loyal and/or like-minded officials the Senate would not confirm, promote energy in agencies whose aims they support, and stymie the work of agencies whose missions they oppose (Kinane 2021; Piper 2022). At the same time, presidents face few barriers to using acting officials, as Congress has granted substantial discretion to fill empty leadership positions and demonstrated scant willingness to assert its advise and consent prerogative (Mendelson 2020). Given these conditions, some may wonder why presidents often subject their appointments to the Senate confirmation process.

We consider one constraint which may prompt presidents to limit their use of actings: public opinion.[2] While institutional constraints afforded Congress and courts on presidents' use of unilateral powers, such as executive orders, often fail to deter unilateral action, recent studies illustrate the public's suspicion toward unilateral action discourages presidents from utilizing those tools (e.g., Christenson and Kriner 2017*b*; Reeves and Rogowski 2016, 2018, 2022*a*). We argue the public's skepticism of unilateralism similarly tinges perceptions of acting officials, whom the president can appoint and remove independently, such that presidents limit their use of actings lest they incur public costs for their reputations and those of agencies they oversee.

[1] "Transcript: President Trump on 'Face the Nation,' February 3, 2019." *Face the Nation*, February 3, 2019, `https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-president-trump-on-face-the-nation-february-3-2019/`.

[2] We use terms including "vacancies," "vacancy appointments," "acting officials," and "actings" interchangeably to refer to cases where an executive branch position subject to the Senate's advise and consent is occupied by someone who has not received Senate confirmation. While there are multiple mechanisms by which presidents can fill vacancies (or allow vacancies to be filled), such as allowing officials designated by statute to assume the responsibilities of posts by "default" or making "strategic" appointments of other senior officials (see Footnote 3), vacancies allow presidents to decide who serves in an acting capacity while circumventing the advise and consent process, even if presidents do so without taking action. Therefore, management of these vacancies represents unilateral exercise of presidential power.

We evaluate our expectations through three pre-registered survey experiments based on the proliferation of acting officials during the first two years of Joe Biden's presidency. Our first experiment prompts respondents to consider President Biden's progress in nominating and confirming officials across the executive branch, and our treatment conditions highlight the presence of acting officials and how they can hamper government performance. Meanwhile, our second and third experiments focus on controversial policy decisions and governmental failures associated with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), both of which were headed by actings when they attracted scrutiny; in our treatment conditions, respondents are apprised of the agency heads' acting status and provided information about why acting leaders may hamstring agencies' performance. Overall, we find scant evidence the public's appraisal of President Biden suffers when the presence of actings is made salient—even when providing context about how they can impede government performance. Alternatively, our results indicate the public punishes agencies when made aware they are run by actings, but only following salient failures. Importantly, these results persist even when conditioning on respondents' partisanship.

Our results have important implications for presidential power and democratic accountability. First, whereas other studies demonstrate the public responds negatively to presidents' use of unilateral powers, like executive orders (Christenson and Kriner 2017*b*; Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*), we find no evidence presidents suffer negative consequences when employing actings. This contrast raises the possibility the public evaluates the various unilateral tools at presidents' disposal differently. Second, our null results raise normative concerns with respect to democratic accountability in the administrative state. As unelected entities, agencies derive much of their legitimacy from their high-ranking officials having been nominated and confirmed by the president and senators, whom voters empower to hold the administrative state accountable (Kagan 2000; Rogowski 2020). If the public seldom sanctions presidents or agencies for deviating from this accountability mechanism, presidents may be emboldened to, in some contexts, appoint actings whose preferences diverge from those of the public when doing so serves presidential policy aspirations, ultimately leading to outcomes at odds with public preferences.

## What Limits Presidents' Use of Acting Appointments?

Appointments to federal agencies are one of the central tools by which presidents exert control over bureaucratic policymaking (Lewis 2008; Moe 1985). While presidents can staff some agency positions at their discretion, they can only make permanent appointments to the most prestigious jobs, such as Cabinet secretaries and agency directors, by nominating individuals the Senate must confirm to their posts. Because the process to install individuals in Presidential Appointments needing Senate confirmation (PAS) positions is time-consuming—especially in the modern era as senatorial delay on nominations has become common —presidents often opt to leave many PAS positions without Senate-confirmed personnel for extended periods (O'Connell 2020).

Presidents can leave these posts empty or, through the Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998 (FVRA), unilaterally select someone to fill them on an interim basis.[3] In addition to saving presidents time and effort associated with the advise and consent process, presidents can exercise greater control over appointments through FVRA because they can empower individuals the Senate might otherwise block (O'Connell 2020). Recent studies indicate presidents' decisions to employ actings rather than pursue the advise and consent process hinge on contextual factors such as their ideological alignment with the agency where the vacancy resides and whether the agency is connected to the president's priorities. For instance, Kinane (2021) and Piper (2022) show presidents more frequently use actings in agencies where they seek positive, or expansive, policy change. Further, Piper (2022) shows presidents use actings more frequently in ideologically opposed agencies and the use of actings sometimes prompts presidents to delay making formal nominations to those positions. Thus, presidents' choices to empower individuals on an interim basis constitute a consequential utensil in their unilateral toolkit (Kinane 2021; see also Lowande and Rogowski 2021).

While scholars have expressed interest in presidents' motivations for using acting appointments, few have considered why presidents often pursue Senate confirmation to fill positions they could more easily populate with actings.[4] Indeed, with the Senate excluded from the process, the key

[3]Under FVRA, an individual serving in the "first deputy" or "first assistant" position below the PAS position becomes the acting official by default. The president may also select a previously confirmed PAS official or a senior agency employee at the GS-15 pay level or above to serve in an acting capacity (O'Connell 2020, 628-630).

[4]Some scholars have speculated that actings may be undesirable because they could degrade agency performance. For instance, agencies with actings may have lower employee morale, be reticent to undertake significant initiatives,

constitutional check on appointment powers is nonexistent and, in the extreme, presidents could fill PAS positions by drawing exclusively from non-Senate confirmed appointees eligible to serve under FVRA. However, Senate-confirmed appointees are the *norm*, not the exception; examining a selection of PAS positions from 15 departments in every year from 1977-2016, Kinane (2021) reports 80.5% of posts were filled by Senate-confirmed personnel.[5] Thus, a paradox emerges whereby presidents exercise moderation in appointing actings despite an absence of formal constraints.

In the next section, we propose a potential limit on presidents' use of actings that resolves this paradox: public opinion. Drawing on recent scholarship on public constraints on unilateral power, we argue presidents avoid excessive use of actings because they diminish public evaluations of presidents and agencies they oversee. Thus, while actings obviate the advise and consent process, public opinion may hold presidents accountable through an alternative pathway.

## Public Constraints on Acting Appointments

All presidents enter office with ambitious electoral, policy, and legacy goals (Light 1999) and immediately inherit immense responsibilities for policy programs and outputs—many of which are beyond the president's control (Cronin 1980; Lowi 1986). While the Constitution grants presidents limited expressed powers through which they can pursue these goals and shoulder these responsibilities, presidents often draw on unilateral powers that enable them to influence the policymaking process without the consent of Congress or the courts (Howell 2003; Lowande and Rogowski 2021). Though most scholarship on unilateral powers focuses on directives issued by presidents, such as executive orders, presidents possess many other unilateral tools that shape the policy process independently, such as directing the flow of federal grants (Kriner and Reeves 2015) and creating Schedule C appointments (Lewis 2005). Recent work identifies actings, which allow presidents to

and curtail long-term planning (O'Connell 2020; Piper and Lewis 2022). Additionally, Park (2022) demonstrates programs overseen by actings make more overpayments—a sign of agency inefficiency. However, because negative impacts on performance can be the objective for presidents seeking to hamstring agencies whose preferences or missions they oppose (Kinane 2021; Piper 2022), they may not constrain presidents' use of actings. Other scholars note actings suffer in comparison to Senate-confirmed officials because of limits on their service (O'Connell 2020; Piper 2022). However, actings can serve for multiple years depending on when they take office and if the president makes nominations to the position.

[5]Focusing on "key" PAS positions, Piper (2022) notes that Presidents Obama, Biden, and Trump placed Senate-confirmed personnel in 53.1% of such positions by the end of their first years in office—a large percentage considering that most PAS positions become vacant when a new president takes office.

lay the groundwork for new policies while circumventing the Senate, as another utensil in presidents' unilateral toolkits (Kinane 2021; Piper 2022).

Unilateral powers enable presidents to make policy more expeditiously than they can working with Congress, but also create accountability problems for American democracy. Namely, when presidents act unilaterally, they sever critical checks and balances afforded Congress and create the risk presidents pursue policies at odds with those of Congress and the public. While Congress and the courts can assert their institutional prerogatives to constrain presidents from acting unilaterally, recent work suggests these coequal branches often fail to confront presidents who do so (Lowande 2021).

Alternatively, scholars have argued the public, rather than Congress and the courts, more effectively constrains unilateral power (Posner and Vermeule 2011). Presidents are responsive to public opinion because it is the coin of the realm for pursuing electoral success, pressuring Congress to support their initiatives, and striving for a favorable legacy; without public support, presidents' futures become short and their reputations crumble (Neustadt 1991). While studies of presidential accountability typically focus on how well presidents' priorities and actions align with those of the public (Wood 2009) and generate favorable policy outcomes (Sances 2021), members of the public also hold preferences over the processes by which presidents and other policymakers exercise authority and reward and sanction for adherence to these processes (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Importantly, many view unilateral action negatively, perceiving it as counter to the rule of law and associated with unpopular past policies (Lowande and Gray 2017; Reeves and Rogowski 2016, 2018). While these unfavorable views can be influenced by partisanship and elite rhetoric (Christenson and Kriner 2017*a*,*b*), they are largely stable across time and even changes in partisan control of the White House (Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*). Consequently, scholars suggest presidents temper their use of unilateral action to avoid public sanction.

Though extant work on the public's ability to constrain unilateral action focuses on presidents' use of directives, we argue public opinion similarly constrains presidents' unilateral authority to appoint actings. A key element of Americans' political socialization through formal schooling and immersion in political life is repeated exposure to skepticism of executive power and how separation

of powers and checks and balances are designed to constrain that power (Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*, 38-42). Importantly, the Senate's authority to provide advise and consent for presidents' nominations to executive and judicial branch posts is not only an expressed constitutional check on the president, but also one to which many Americans are exposed through the socialization process. For instance, senatorial advise and consent for executive branch appointments features as required content in the curricular standards of several states[6] and the College Board's AP U.S. Government and Politics course.[7] Thus, presidents' use of actings, which subverts the Senate's advise and consent authority, may activate the same concerns among Americans that unilateral directives raise and prompt them to punish presidents.

Whereas unilateral directives reflect primarily on the president, who uses them to issue specific policy-oriented statements attributable to him directly (Ansolabehere and Rogowski 2020), presidents' use of actings could also color public perception of the agencies they inhabit. That agency leaders, who are the most salient officials in their agencies, are empowered outside the standard appointment process might prompt the public to offer more negative perceptions of agencies headed by actings. Since presidents are held accountable for managing the executive branch and the public's perception of their management ultimately influences their reputation (Rogowski 2020), presidents must be cognizant not only of how the public responds to acting appointments, but also to how it reacts to the presence of actings when evaluating the agencies they inhabit. Thus, in considering how the public may constrain presidents' use of actings, it is important to consider actings may prompt public costs not only for presidents' reputations, but also for those of agencies actings oversee.

In addition to our expectations concerning the effects of actings on public opinion toward

[6]E.g., "Michigan K-12 Standard: Social Studies," *Michigan Department of Education*, June 2019, pages 126-127, https://www.michigan.gov/mde/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/Academic-Standards/Social_Studies_Standards.pdf?rev=4bab170dd4114e2dbce578723b37ca63&hash=5FFECB84DFC0955211D7CFBA30C5586D; "Ohio's Model Curriculum: Social Studies," *Ohio Department of Education*, June 2019, pages 98 and 128, https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Social-Studies/Model-Curriculum-for-Social-Studies/OhiosModelCurriculumSocialStudies.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US.

[7]Under Topic 2.5, "Checks on the Presidency," the role of Senate confirmation is noted as Essential Knowledge for success on the AP exam ("AP U.S. Government and Politics: Course and Exam Description," *College Board*, 2023, page 61, https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/ap-us-government-and-politics-course-and-exam-description.pdf). In May 2023, 329,132 students took the AP exam for this course, making it the fifth-most popular AP exam offered by College Board ("Student Score Distributions: AP Exams-May 2023," *College Board*, https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/ap-score-distributions-by-subject-2023.pdf).

presidents and federal agencies, we posit two mechanisms which might underlie these effects. First, actings may impact perceptions of the executive branch's legitimacy. As an unelected entity of government, the bureaucracy's legitimacy is sourced in large part from the control and oversight elected officials—Congress and the president—exercise over it (Kagan 2000; Rogowski 2020). The appointment process, by which both the president and Senate sanction officials in PAS positions, helps confer legitimacy on leaders and their agencies. However, when presidents circumvent the Senate with actings, the public may perceive those officials as less legitimate because they carry approval from only one of the two coequal branches and may represent attempts by the president to empower leaders that would not receive an endorsement from its elected senators. Additionally, presidents' use of actings may undercut legitimacy if the public perceives those appointments as distasteful attempts to politicize the bureaucracy by installing like-minded allies without Senate consultation (Moe 1985). These diminished perceptions of agencies' legitimacy may subsequently undermine approval of presidents and executive branch.

Second, acting officials may impair public perceptions of the executive branch's competence. One of the key reasons elected officials and the public grant authority to bureaucratic entities is because they cultivate reputations for competence and expertise. When bureaucrats demonstrate high levels of knowledge and skill in their respective domains, they enjoy more autonomy and compliance with their actions (Carpenter 2001). While actings may have equivalent competence and expertise as their Senate-confirmed counterparts, their transitory titles and lack of Senate confirmation may signal they are of inferior quality. These perceptions may lead the public to question whether the agencies actings oversee perform competently under their direction, ultimately eroding approval of the agencies themselves and the individual responsible for them—the president.

Finally, while our preceding expectations pertain to the public generally, recent scholarship suggests public responses to unilateral action can be conditioned by partisan or ideological predilections. For instance, Christenson and Kriner (2017*a*) find people respond more positively to unilateral action when the president shares their partisan affiliation and the policy aligns with their preferences. However, Reeves and Rogowski (2018) show unilateral action diminishes support for the president strongest among those who agree with the policy the president adopts, suggesting

policy agreement is tempered by procedural means. Because these studies find evidence of partisan- and ideology-conditional effects, but in different directions, we do not have ex ante expectations concerning how partisanship or ideological leanings might moderate the effect of actings on public opinion, but conduct exploratory analyses of these potential effects.

**Alternative Expectations for Null Results**

While recent studies of public constraints on unilateral directives suggest presidents' use of actings may trigger similar constraints, contextual differences between the two types of unilateral action may dilute the public's ability or willingness to sanction in the latter case. Given our null hypothesis significance testing framework, we are unable to explicitly test the expectation that these contextual differences may give rise to null results for actings. However, we juxtapose them with our expectations so as to highlight differences that could affect the generalizability of extant findings concerning public opinion and unilateral power, which have primarily focused on directives (Lowande and Rogowski 2021), across venues where presidents can act alone.

First, Americans may not recognize acting appointments as an exercise of unilateral power. In the context of unilateral directives, the traceability chain by which the public links the president to the action is short, as the directive is directly attributable to the president (Arnold 1990). However, for acting appointments, the traceability chain is more complex because the public must understand that actings are distinct from Senate-confirmed appointments, the president is solely responsible for actings, and the president can use them to skirt the Senate's advise and consent power to implement a sanction. Given Americans are often ill-informed about government procedure (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), they may fail to sanction presidents for utilizing actings because they lack needed information to recognize them as exercises of unilateral power.

Second, Americans' skepticism of unilateral power may be weaker in the context of presidential management of executive branch personnel. Whereas directives' capacity to immediately "make" policy can be seen to encroach on Congress' legislative powers, the public may be more accommodating of the president, as chief executive, exercising unilateral control over staffing decisions. Indeed, in the three-question unilateral policymaking instrument introduced by Reeves and Ro-

gowski (2022*a*, 49-56), the level of public support for unilateralism in managing implementation in the executive branch is consistently twice as strong as support for unilateral creation of policies or appointment of judges.[8] Consequently, Americans may not sanction presidents for appointing actings because they do not perceive that action as an abuse of executive power.

## Research Design

Examining the implications of elite actions, such as the president's choice to utilize an acting official, on public opinion poses important research design challenges (see Boston et al. 2023; Miller and Reeves 2022; Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*). Presidents staff leadership positions in the executive branch both through the advise and consent process and acting appointments. However, were we to compare existing opinion poll measures of public perceptions of the president and the executive branch following the president making each type of appointment or appointees of each type taking public actions, we could not attribute differences in attitudes to appointee type alone. The key barrier to inference is confounding; because no two appointees are identical, serve in the same contexts, and conduct the same policymaking activities, we could not attribute observed differences in opinion to the officials' means of appointment.

In light of these challenges, we utilize survey experiments which present respondents with realistic tableaus about appointees that systematically vary whether they are Senate-confirmed or acting while holding all other aspects constant. Through random assignment, we can attribute differences in respondent perceptions of the president and executive branch to the featured appointees' status.

When employing survey experiments, it is critical to be mindful of external validity (Cohen 2017). Several features of our design promote external validity and enable us to generalize our results to real-world contexts. First, because people may encounter information about whether executive branch leaders are acting or Senate-confirmed at many stages in the policy process, we

[8]For instance, whereas 58% of Americans agreed presidents should have "authority to decide how executive agencies will implement bills passed by Congress" in May 2014, only 25% and 26% agreed presidents should be able to "enact policies" or "appoint judges of [their] choosing" without congressional approval, respectively. While the implementation question asks about presidents' ability to exercise discretion over how policy is carried out rather than who implements the policy, the relatively high level of agreement may suggest the public is more comfortable with unilateralism exercised within the executive branch.

implement three experiments, each of which focuses on a different context where respondents may become aware of officials' Senate-confirmed or acting status. In our Executive Branch experiment, we focus on the appointment stage by apprising respondents of Joe Biden's progress at staffing the executive branch with his appointees, and our treatment conditions highlight the large proportion of positions occupied by actings. Alternatively, in our FDA experiment, we spotlight the policymaking process by focusing on the agency's decision to approve a new drug, and our treatments emphasize the commissioner's acting status. Finally, in our FAA experiment, we feature the implementation stage by leveraging an outage of a key safety system that caused massive air travel disruptions, and our treatment conditions highlight this outage occurred while an acting administrator oversaw the FAA. By situating these experiments in different contexts, we are able to assess the extent to which public responses to actings are dependent on the circumstances under which the public learns about officials' appointment status.

Second, we ensure our vignettes' content is realistic by drawing directly from media reports highlighting actings in the executive branch. As we detail below and in Supplemental Information Section A, our vignettes focus on discrete events that received attention from major media outlets and draw heavily on language in published news stories. For instance, our Executive Branch vignettes are drawn nearly verbatim from a May 2021 *The Wall Street Journal* story providing an overview of President Biden's progress in filling executive branch positions through his first five months in office. Further, the Acting Official conditions in our FDA and FAA experiments, which add "Acting" to the agency heads' titles, mirrors media outlets' standard practice of identifying officials' acting status.[9] By using news events covered by and text from major outlets, we ensure we expose respondents to information the public plausibly encounters in everyday life and the strength of our treatments mirrors the wording and content typically used to convey our concepts.

## Experimental Protocol

We fielded our Executive Branch and FDA experiments in July 2021 with approximately 3,100 respondents recruited through Lucid, an online survey platform that provides researchers with

[9]See Supplemental Information Section A.4 for details.

panels whose demographic characteristics mirror those of the national population (Coppock and McClellan 2019). In the survey flow, respondents were randomly assigned to participate in one of the experiments, thus splitting the sample into roughly even sizes. For our FAA experiment, we recruited approximately 1,170 respondents in February 2023 through CloudResearch Connect, which also provides panels with distributions of demographic characteristics similar to those of the US population.[10] The empirical expectations, experimental design, and analytical procedures for all three experiments were pre-registered through Evidence in Governance and Politics.[11] The pre-registration process seeks to promote transparency, as we ex ante commit to our expectations, design, and analytical approach, thus forestalling selective reporting of only results that conform to our expectations or post-hoc theorizing from a single set of results that may not align with extant theoretical paradigms (Ofosu and Posner 2021).

**Executive Branch**

Respondents in our Executive Branch experiment were presented with a vignette about President Biden's progress in filling executive branch vacancies through his first five months in office.[12] All respondents read two paragraphs about how Biden had, by the beginning of June 2021, made more nominations to Senate-confirmed positions than Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump had at the same stage of their presidencies, but that the Senate had confirmed fewer of his nominees than it had for Clinton, Bush, and Obama. Those assigned to our first treatment condition—the Acting Officials treatment—also receive an additional sentence explaining that, because few of Biden's nominees had been confirmed, "some Cabinet-level departments in the executive branch of the US government are led by deputy secretaries and many key positions are filled with acting leadership."

[10] In both surveys, respondents completed a battery of pre-treatment demographic questions and two attention checks (see Supplemental Information Section A).

[11] The pre-registration documents associated with our experiments can be found at: `https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/8YZ3B` and `https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EWA6J`.

[12] See Supplemental Information Section A.1 for vignette and question wording. This vignette draws heavily from a *The Wall Street Journal* article which discussed the pace of Biden's nominations and confirmations to executive branch positions (Thomas, Ken. "Biden Leads Predecessors in Nominations, Lags Behind in Confirmations," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2021, `https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-leads-predecessors-in-nominations-lags-in-confirmations-11622367002`).

While the Acting Officials treatment makes clear many leadership positions in the executive branch were filled by actings, it is possible respondents may not understand the deleterious consequences actings can have for government performance. To assess whether respondents respond more negatively to actings once informed why they might be problematic, we provided respondents in our second treatment condition—the Acting Officials with Context treatment—the same text supplied in the Acting Officials treatment as well as another sentence taken nearly verbatim from the *The Wall Street Journal* article discussing how "[t]he lack of Senate-confirmed leaders throughout government can lead to delays in implementing executive actions and initiatives across the executive branch." By including both treatments, we can discern whether respondents react to the mere mention of "acting" status or whether they react only once apprised of the implications of actings.[13]

After reading their assigned vignette, respondents were asked to express their level of approval for the president's job performance and his management of the executive branch, as well as their perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the executive branch.[14]

**FDA**

Participants in our FDA experiment received a vignette about the Food and Drug Administration's June 2021 approval of aducanumab, a novel drug developed to treat Alzheimer's disease.[15] This approval was overseen by Dr. Janet Woodcock, a longtime FDA official who President Biden

[13]Importantly, the Acting Official(s) with Context treatments in our three experiments allow us to assess how the combination of indicating officials' acting status and providing context for the implications of actings affects perceptions of presidents and the executive branch relative to only providing an indication of acting status (Acting Official(s)) or providing no additional information (Control), but does not facilitate a comparison to only providing information about the context in which appointees operate (i.e., a "Context" treatment). However, this comparison constitutes an implausible counterfactual for our case because contextual information about the implications of acting status can only arise in the presence of acting status. Nevertheless, officials' Senate-confirmed or acting status and individual-level performance may have important implications for public appraisals of presidents and the executive branch, and we encourage future studies to explore those facets.

[14]Perceptions of competence and legitimacy are measured using four questions—two for each concept that are subsequently averaged (see Supplementation Information Section A for question wordings and Section B for discussion of scale construction).

[15]See Supplemental Information Section A.2 for vignette and question wording. Our vignettes draw heavily from articles published by *The New York Times* and *Politico* (Kaplan, Sheila. "F.D.A. Still Lacks a Permanent Chief, Despite Pressing, Weighty Problems," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2021, `https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/12/health/fda-woodcock-agenda.html`; Owermohle, Sarah and Cancryn, Adam and Gardner, Lauren. "Controversial Drug Approval Stokes Concern About Lack of a Permanent FDA Chief," *Politico*, June 11, 2021, `https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/11/fda-woodcock-controversial-drug-approval-493324`).

named acting commissioner at the beginning of his term, and our treatments exploit Commissioner Woodcock's acting status by providing or withholding this information while holding all other components of the vignettes constant. All respondents were presented with two paragraphs recounting Dr. Woodcock's decision to approve aducanumab despite criticism from medical experts who asserted its clinical trials did not provide sufficient evidence of effectiveness.

While respondents in the Control condition were told "FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock" approved the drug, respondents in the Acting Official condition were told "Acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock" made the decision. Similar to our Executive Branch experiment, respondents in a Acting Official with Context condition were provided additional information that critics argued the decision "highlights the need for a permanent commissioner to run the agency... [because] the agency lacks leadership to launch new initiatives, make major policy decisions, and address a backlog of plant inspections and drug and medical device approvals," and that President Biden had not yet nominated a permanent commissioner.

After reading their assigned vignette, respondents were asked to express their levels of approval for Biden's handling of his job as president, his management of the FDA, Dr. Woodcock's handling of her job as FDA Commissioner, and the FDA's approval of aducanumab. Finally, respondents were asked to express their perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the FDA using a question battery similar to that in the Executive Branch experiment.

**FAA**

Respondents in our FAA experiment received a vignette about an outage affecting the FAA's Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM) system, which provides pilots information about potential hazards on their flight routes. When this system malfunctioned early on January 11, 2023, the FAA grounded all flights within the United States for 90 minutes, causing over 10,000 flight delays and 1,300 flight cancellations and inconveniencing untold numbers of passengers.[16] Like most governmental failures, the NOTAM outage sparked a "blame game" in which the media and political elites scrutinized the FAA's actions and sought to identify someone to hold accountable (Hood 2011; Miller and Reeves

[16] Josephs, Leslie, "Flight Disruptions Ease After FAA Outage but Questions Linger about System Outage," *CNBC*, January 12, 2023, `https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/12/faa-notam-outage-flight-impact-eases.html`.

2022). Notably, the FAA was headed by an acting administrator, Billy Nolen, and, similar to our FDA experiment, we leveraged Nolen's status to provide or withhold information about his role as an acting official while holding the remainder of the vignette constant.

We provided all respondents two paragraphs detailing the NOTAM outage and the FAA's initial response.[17] While those in the Control condition read the FAA was overseen by "Administrator Billy Nolen," respondents in the Acting Official condition instead read "Acting Administrator Billy Nolen" was in charge. Alternatively, respondents in our Acting Official with Context condition received an additional paragraph indicating critics "expressed concern that the FAA system outage highlights the need for a permanent administrator to run the agency," and without a permanent leader "the agency lacks the leadership to launch new initiatives, make major policy decisions, and address a backlog of approvals and certifications of aircraft and aircraft parts." Additionally, respondents in this condition were informed President Biden nominated a permanent FAA administrator in July 2022, but the Senate had not yet confirmed his nominee.

After reviewing their vignettes, respondents were prompted to provide their levels of approval for Biden's handling of his job as president, his management of the FAA, Billy Nolen's handling of his job as FAA Administrator, and the FAA's handling of the NOTAM malfunction. Respondents were also asked to indicate their perceptions of the FAA's competence and legitimacy using a question battery similar to those in our other experiments.

## Results

We evaluate our pre-registered expectations using linear regression. We supplement our analyses with causal mediation (Imai et al. 2011) to assess whether the effects of our treatments are mediated by respondents' perceptions of agencies' competence and legitimacy. We present a full examination of the overall treatment effects in the main text, but only mention key findings from our causal

[17]See Supplemental Information Section A.3 for vignette and question wording. Our vignettes adhere to the same format as those in the FDA experiment, but with factual details changed to reflect the FAA's NOTAM outage. We drew heavily from the *CNBC* article in Footnote 16, as well as articles published by *CNN* and *Reuters* (Fung, Brian, "Aging, outdated technology leaves air travel at risk of meltdown," *CNN*, January 13, 2023, `https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/13/business/airline-meltdowns`; Shepardson, David, "U.S. Congress to investigate FAA computer outage that snarled flights," *Reuters*, January 11, 2023, `https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-senate-commerce-committee-investigate-faa-computer-outage-2023-01-11/`).

mediation analyses and reserve full presentation for Supplemental Information Section B.

For ease of presentation, we use binary indicators for respondents' approval of President Biden, the FDA, and the FAA, such that treatment effects represent the change in approval for the object of evaluation relative to the level of approval expressed by respondents in the corresponding control condition. For instance, a value of -0.02 for presidential approval would indicate respondents in a given treatment condition expressed a level of approval 2 percentage points lower than control condition respondents. Alternatively, our measures of respondents' perceptions of the executive branch, FDA, and FAA's competence and legitimacy range from 1 to 4, where higher values indicate stronger perceptions of each quality.

Figure 1 presents the treatment effects associated with our Acting Official(s) and Acting Official(s) with Context (circles and triangles, respectively) for the Executive Branch, FDA, and FAA experiments (left, center, and right panes, respectively). Considering first the results from our Executive Branch and FDA experiments, we see that respondents in both treatment conditions did not offer evaluations of President Biden or the agencies in question that were distinguishably different from those offered by respondents in the control condition across all outcomes. For instance, Executive Branch respondents in the Acting Officials and Acting Officials with Context treatments were only 2 to 3 percentage points less likely to approve of Biden's handling of the executive branch, and the Bonferroni-corrected 95% confidence intervals for these estimates include zero. Together, the findings from both experiments provide no evidence the use of actings exact public costs on presidents or the executive branch.

However, our FAA experiment yields a substantively different pattern of results. While respondents in both treatment conditions again express levels of approval for President Biden's overall performance as president and handling of the FAA that are not distinguishably different from those in the control condition, those in the Acting Official with Context condition provide distinguishably more negative evaluations of the FAA. When asked to express levels of approval for FAA Acting Administrator Billy Nolen and the FAA's handling of the NOTAM outage, respondents in the Acting Official with Context condition are 11 and 18 percentage points less approving, respectively, than those in the control condition. We also observe the perceptions of the FAA's competence

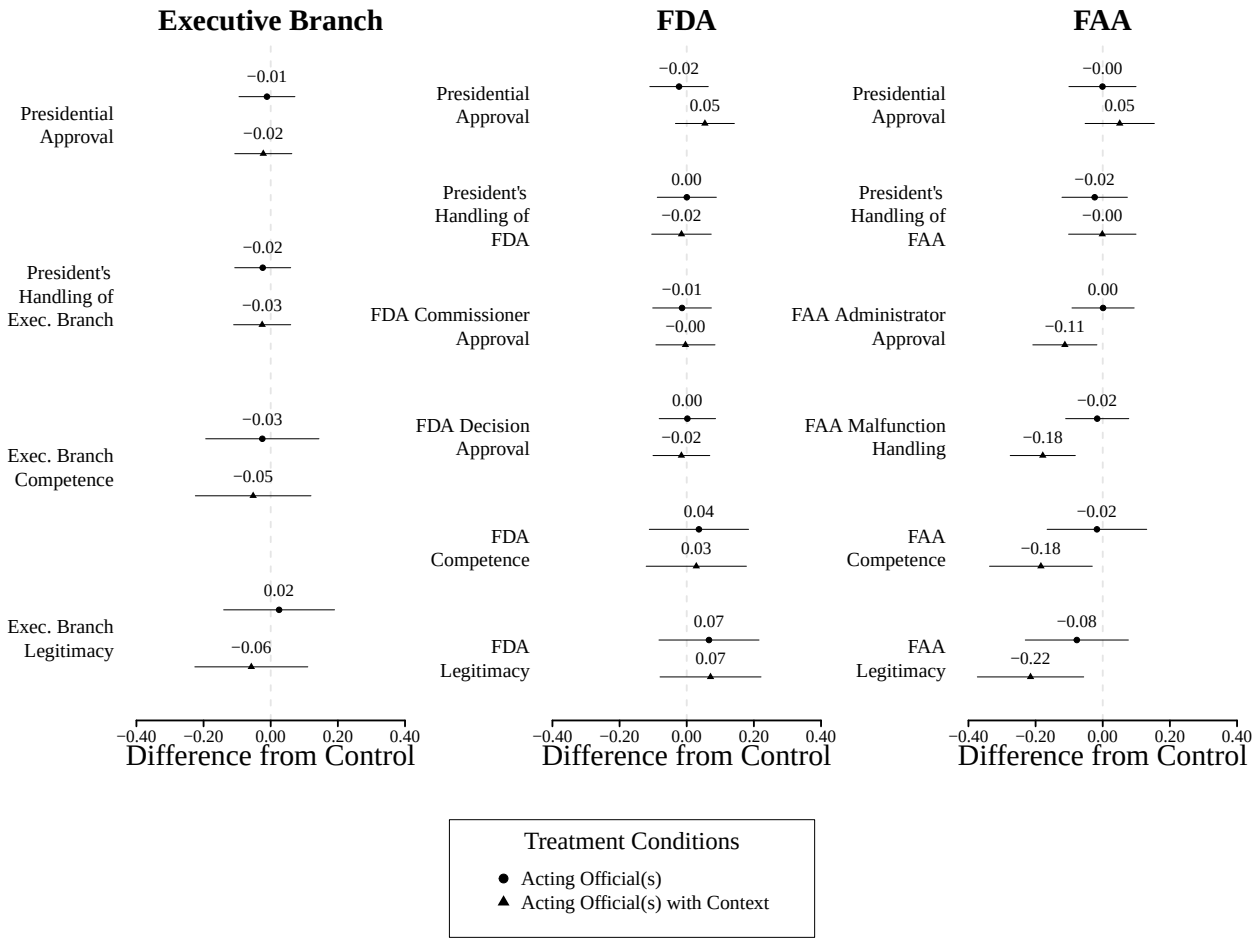


Figure 1: **Public Responses to Vacancy Appointments.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of the Acting Official(s) (circles) and Acting Official(s) with Context (triangles) conditions relative to the control condition in the Executive Branch (right panel), FDA (center panel), and FAA (right panel) experiments. Approval outcome measures are coded as binary variables, such that positive (negative) values along the $x$-axis reflect increases (decreases) in approval ratings relative to the control condition (i.e., -0.02 reflects a 2 percentage point decrease). Competence and legitimacy outcome measures are coded on a 1 to 4 scale, such that higher (lower) values reflect increases (decreases) in respondents' perceptions of the executive branch, FDA, or FAA's competence and legitimacy. Bars around point estimates represent Bonferroni-corrected 95 percent confidence intervals ($\alpha = \frac{0.05}{8} = 0.00625$ for Executive Branch, $\alpha = \frac{0.05}{12} = 0.0041\overline{6}$ for FDA and FAA).

and legitimacy among those in the Acting Official with Context condition are 0.18 and 0.22 points lower on 1 to 4 scales, respectively, relative to those of control condition respondents. Our causal mediation analyses indicate respondents' perceptions of both the FAA's competence and legitimacy mediate between 30% to 60% of the effect of the Acting Officials with Context treatment on evaluations of Acting Administrator Nolen and the FAA's handling of the malfunction (see Supplemental

Information Section B.3). Importantly, these negative effects are not observed among respondents in the Acting Official condition, suggesting that it is the combination of making respondents aware of Nolen's acting status and apprising them of why actings can be detrimental, rather than merely identifying Nolen as an acting, that prompts these costs for the FAA. Overall, in the wake of the FAA's governmental failure with an acting administrator at the helm, the president evades public costs from empowering an acting as in the Executive Branch and FDA experiments, but the agency itself incurs the public's wrath when people are informed about the dangers of actings.

### Partisan-Conditional Effects

We examine the extent to which respondents' partisan identification conditions the effect of our treatments by interacting our treatment indicators with a dichotomous indicator for whether each respondent is a copartisan of President Biden (i.e., a Democrat) and present the resulting partisan-conditional effects in Figure 2. Overall, the partisan-conditional analyses for our Executive Branch and FDA experiments yield null results similar to those in Figure 1, as they are all of substantively small magnitude and not statistically distinguishable. However, in the FAA experiment, we observe some conditional effects among both presidential copartisans and non-copartisans. As with our results for the full sample, we see neither treatment exerted statistically distinguishable effects on respondents' evaluations of President Biden; while approval of Biden's handling of the FAA and his job as president are between 1 and 6 percentage points higher among copartisans assigned to one of the treatment conditions and between 0 and 10 percentage points lower among non-copartisans in one of our treatment conditions, relative to their control condition counterparts, none of these estimates are statistically distinguishable. However, for respondents' evaluations of the FAA, presidential copartisans and non-copartisans in the Acting Official with Context condition offer more negative evaluations than those in the control condition. For instance, approval ratings for Acting Administrator Nolen and for the FAA's handling of the NOTAM outage are 16 and 23 percentage points lower among non-copartisans in the Acting Official with Context condition relative to control condition non-copartisans, respectively. Copartisans in the Acting Official with Context condition are also less approving of Acting Administrator Nolen and the FAA's handling

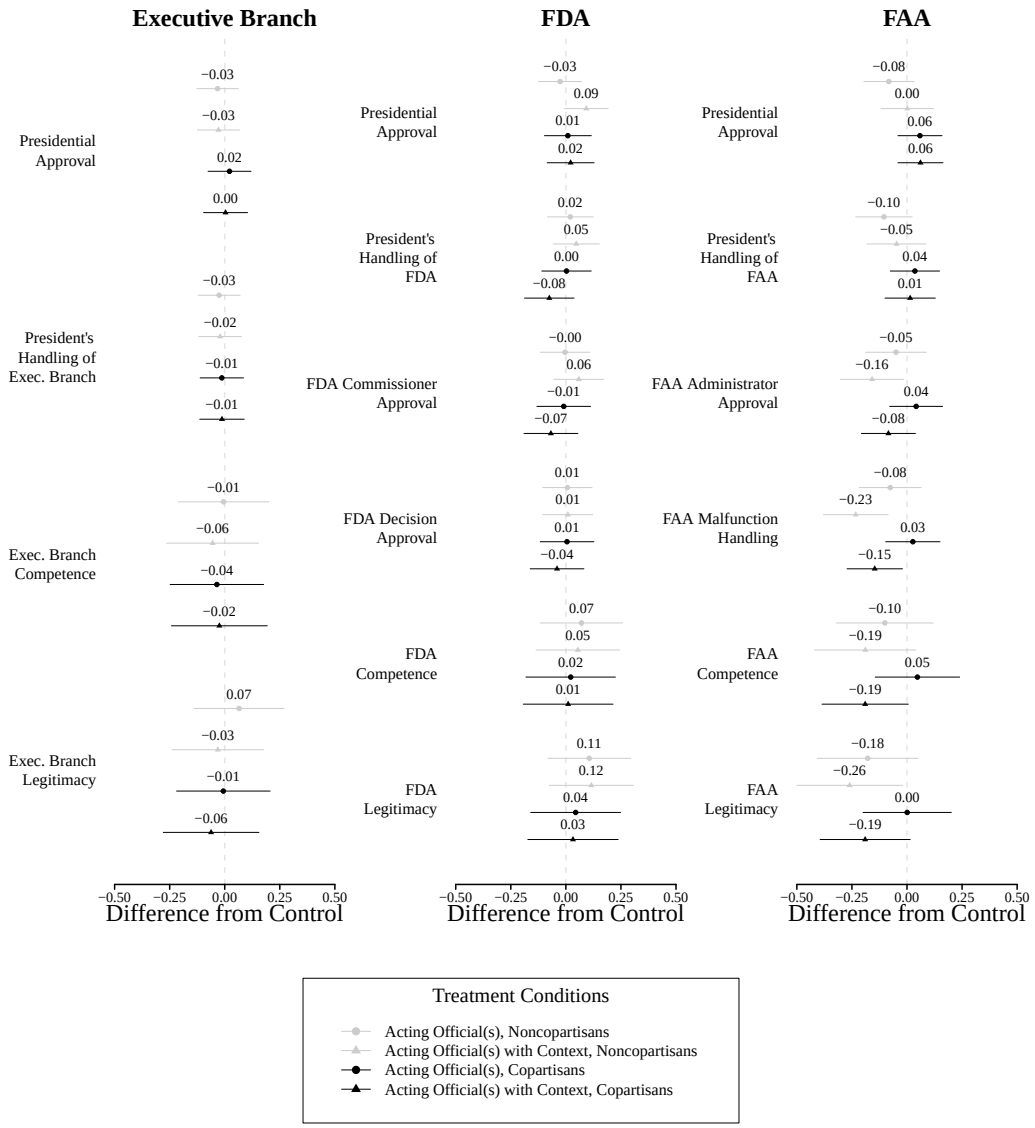


Figure 2: **Partisan-Conditional Responses to Vacancy Appointments.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of the Acting Official(s) (circles) and Acting Official(s) with Context (triangles) conditions relative to the control condition in the Executive Branch, FDA, and FAA experiments (left, center, and right panes, respectively). Black points and lines correspond with the treatment effects among respondents who are presidential copartisans (i.e., Democrats), while gray points and lines correspond with the treatment effects among presidential noncopartisans (i.e., those not identifying as Democrats). Approval outcome measures are coded as binary variables, such that positive (negative) values along the $x$-axis reflect increases (decreases) in approval ratings relative to the control condition (i.e., -0.03 reflects a 3 percentage point decrease). Competence and legitimacy outcome measures are coded on a 1 to 4 scale, such that higher (lower) values reflect increases (decreases) in respondents' perceptions of the executive branch, FDA, or FAA's competence and legitimacy. Bars around point estimates represent Bonferroni-corrected 95 percent confidence intervals ($\alpha = \frac{0.05}{16} = 0.003125$ for Executive Branch, $\alpha = \frac{0.05}{24} = 0.00208\bar{3}$ for FDA and FAA).

of the outage (decreases of 8 and 15 percentage points, respectively), though only the effect for the latter outcome is statistically distinguishable.

Finally, we observe that both copartisans and non-copartisans in the Acting Official with Context condition offer more negative perceptions of the FAA's competence and legitimacy relative to respondents in their corresponding control condition, though only the effect of the Acting Official with Context treatment on perceptions of the FAA's legitimacy among non-copartisans—a decrease of 0.26 points on a 1 to 4 scale—is statistically distinguishable. While more of the treatment effects associated with evaluations of the FAA are statistically distinguishable among presidential non-copartisans compared to copartisans, the differences in the effects of the Acting Official with Context for each of the four FAA-related outcomes between copartisans and non-copartisans are not statistically distinguishable at the Bonferroni-corrected 95 percent level. Thus, we find no evidence that the treatment effects observed in the FAA experiment for the full sample in Figure 1 are driven by differences among presidential copartisans and non-copartisans; rather, we recover some evidence that both types of respondents express less favorable opinions of the FAA when provided information about why placing an acting official at its helm may degrade performance.

## Discussion

Our results offer little evidence to support our expectations concerning the effect of acting officials on public evaluations of presidents and federal agencies. For evaluations of President Biden directly, we find scant evidence that using acting officials in any of the contexts we consider harms his reputation. For federal agencies, we find no evidence that the presence of actings in a general sense (Executive Branch experiment) or at the center of a controversial policymaking decision (FDA experiment) erodes support, but we do find an agency suffers public costs when implicated in a governmental failure with an acting official in charge and the public is apprised of the negative consequences of actings (FAA experiment). Though the conditions in each of our experiments constitute each other's counterfactuals, the experiments differ along several important dimensions (e.g., stage of the policy process, agencies implicated), which makes it difficult to discern why the consequences for agency reputations diverge. While we cannot provide definitive explanations for

these differences, we offer two potential explanations.

First, unlike the routine functioning of the federal bureaucracy and decisionmaking by federal agencies, governmental failures prompt the public to attribute blame and hold someone accountable for the negative policy outcome (Arnold 1990; Hood 2011; Miller and Reeves 2022). While respondents in the Acting Official(s) with Context treatments in Executive Branch and FDA experiments were apprised of the potential dangers of actings, they may not have comprehended how these dangers could manifest as real-world consequences and thus lacked incentive to prospectively punish agencies. However, once governmental failures occur, as in the FAA experiment, context that an acting official's presence may have prompted the failure may simplify the public's task of tracing responsibility to the agency and its acting leadership.

Second, the degree of ambiguity concerning how negative an acting official's presence is for agency performance may condition the public's reaction. In our Executive Branch experiment, the negative consequences of acting officials were presented as prospective and fairly abstract, with respondents in our Acting Official with Context condition told actings "*can* lead to delays in implementing executive actions and initiatives across the executive branch" (emphasis added). In our FDA experiment, respondents were presented with the two-sided frame reflected in contemporary journalistic accounts whereby "Alzheimer's patient advocacy groups praised the FDA's decision" but "medical experts... criticized the decision"; through providing both positive and negative considerations, these vignettes and the journalistic accounts they drew from may have led respondents to perceive the consequences of an acting official's presence as opaque (Zaller 1992).[18] However, because the NOTAM outage was unambiguously disastrous, respondents were motivated to punish someone for it and did not encounter countervailing frames deflecting blame from the FAA; thus, once informed the presence of an acting may have precipitated the outage, respondents exercised accountability by sanctioning the agency.

[18]The FDA "Acting with Context" treatment may have generated additional opacity because the agency's approval of aducanumab—a seemingly significant action—is juxtaposed with context that "[w]ithout a permanent commissioner, the agency lacks the leadership to... make major policy decisions..." However, to the extent this disjoint contributed to opacity, it mirrors the language used by journalists who reported on the approval, thus reflecting the real-world conditions under which respondents would learn about the decision.

## Conclusion

In his *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, Justice Joseph Story asserts that, through the Constitution's design, presidents are "compelled to consult public opinion in the most important appointments; and must be interested to vindicate the propriety of his appointments, by selections from those whose qualifications are unquestioned and unquestionable. If he should act otherwise... it will be impossible for him to long retain public favor" (1851, 329). In Story's framework, public opinion should serve as a check when the "propriety" of presidents' appointments are undermined, as acting appointments—which skirt the typical appointments process by excluding the Senate—may do. However, our experiments provide little evidence the public constrains presidents from utilizing actings; in fact, even when respondents were provided with context drawn from real-world journalistic sources explaining why actings can harm government performance, they did not punish President Biden, and they only punished federal agencies in the wake of notable governmental failures. While presidents' ability to exercise other types of unilateral powers, such as executive orders, may be constrained by public opinion (Christenson and Kriner 2017*b*; Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*), our results suggest the public largely absolves the president of similar costs when using actings. Though negative consequences for agencies themselves, as demonstrated in our FAA experiment, could discourage presidents from utilizing actings, this disincentive is an effective check on presidents only to the extent they prioritize the public reputation of the executive branch; given presidents' use of actings often stems from a motivation to hamstring affected agencies (Kinane 2021; Piper 2022), these costs to agencies' reputations may only encourage presidents to use them.

Though our experiments cannot shed light on why we observe null effects, our findings should motivate research into the underlying mechanisms that stunt public accountability for acting appointments. As we noted earlier, one potential explanation is that the public does not recognize acting appointments as exercises of unilateral power. This lack of recognition may stem from the more complex traceability chain inherent in acting appointments relative to directives, as citizens must understand the reason actings exist and the presidents' role in appointing them to identify them as instances of unilateralism (Arnold 1990). Under this reasoning, other more opaque exercises of unilateral power, such as directing agency officials to direct grants to certain geographic

locations (Kriner and Reeves 2015), may also evade public opprobrium.

Relatedly, our null results may emerge because the public does not recognize how presidents can use actings to purposefully circumvent the constitutional advise and consent process, such that its skepticism towards unilateralism is not activated. While our Acting Official(s) with Context conditions imply the presence of actings is outside the standard advise and consent process, they do not explicitly highlight presidential malintent that could trigger sanction, such as purposefully appointing as actings political allies or unqualified individuals the Senate would not confirm. This absence is consistent with the tone of media reports of acting officials to which the public is exposed when actings receive coverage, as only 3.0% of articles (685 of 23,050) mentioning actings in major U.S. newspapers from 1980 to 2022 convey information or elite rhetoric framing presidents' use of actings as contrary to the rule of law.[19] However, this does not disclose the possibility that elites, such as members of Congress, may activate public suspicion of unilateral power by framing actings as an instance of presidential malintent. Indeed, President Trump's 2018 selection of Matthew Whitaker as acting attorney general is one of the few acting appointments in recent years that sparked elite accusations of malintent, as Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) lamented that Trump "install[ed] an unconfirmed lackey... whose stated purpose, apparently, is undermining a major investigation into the president," and Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) accused Trump of "denying Senators our constitutional obligation... [to] scrutiniz[e] the nomination of our nation's top law enforcement official."[20] Future studies should explore how other political actors might leverage the context surrounding actings, such as the president's malintent or the actings' loyalties and qualifications, to stimulate accountability (Christenson and Kriner 2017*b*).[21]

Alternatively, respondents may not have reacted to our treatments because the public's distaste

[19] See Supplemental Information A.4 for details.

[20] Senator Richard Blumenthal. "Blumenthal, Whitehouse & Hirono Challenge Unlawful Appointment of Matthew Whitaker As Acting Attorney General." November 19, 2018, `https://www.blumenthal.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/blumenthal-whitehouse-and-hirono-challenge-unlawful-appointment-of-matthew-whitaker-as-acting-attorney-general`.

[21] By contrast, malintent by members of Congress, such as placing senatorial holds on nominees en masse, could create conditions under which presidents must utilize actings to keep government running. While Reeves and Rogowski (2022*b*) find the public sanctions presidents for using unilateral directives even when congressional inaction prevents legislative action, citizens may be more understanding of presidents' use of actings in the face of congressional malintent because the public is more supportive of unilateralism within the executive branch (Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*, 49-56) and, so long as presidents have made nominations, Congress' inaction itself causes unilateralism as the status quo.

for unilateralism in policymaking does not carry over to presidents' management of executive branch personnel. Given findings in recent studies that presidents face public costs for using unilateral directives (Christenson and Kriner 2017*a*,*b*; Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*), our findings highlight an important motivation for publishing null results—to share insights about the limits about a theory's generalizability to other contexts. Unlike unilateral directives, acting appointments do not directly "make" policy, but instead assign individuals to specific, empty roles within the executive branch—staffing decisions the public may perceive as within the purview of the chief executive. Indeed, that the public is more supportive of unilateralism in the context of managing the executive branch relative to encroaching on the jurisdictions of Congress and the courts (Reeves and Rogowski 2022*a*, 49-56) suggests presidents may enjoy more latitude to exercise unilateral influence within agencies. Consequently, future work should consider if other unilateral politicizing and centralizing tactics within the executive branch, such as Schedule C appointments and Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs review (Lewis 2008; Lewis and More 2013; Moe 1985), are also less likely to raise public ire than unilateral directives.

In the absence of evidence for public costs to presidents for using actings, we are left with the same paradox we presented at the outset: if presidents face few institutional barriers to using actings, why do they not use them more often? Even President Trump, who used more vacancy appointees than any other modern president, left office with 524 (69.2%) of the 757 "key" PAS positions, as defined by the *Washington Post* and Partnership for Public Service, occupied by Senate-confirmed personnel.[22] Future work should investigate what other constraints press presidents to hew to the advice and consent process for most appointments. One possibility is that the perceptions of other key constituencies—namely personnel within agencies and outside stakeholders, such as Congress and interest groups—limit presidents' use of acting officials. Some scholars have suggested that these groups perceive acting officials as possessing less influence than their confirmed counterparts (O'Connell 2020; Piper 2022). Presidents may also send their appointees

[22]President Trump would have left office with an even higher number of positions with confirmed appointees were it not for a large number of resignations following the insurrection he provoked at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 that sought to prevent Congress' certification of the Electoral College ballots. ("The Nominees Donald Trump Tapped for Key Roles During His Term." *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, `https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-administration-appointee-tracker/database/`).

to the Senate because the performance of agencies suffers when vacancies persist and actings are chosen (Park 2022; Piper and Lewis 2022). However, that presidents are more likely to use actings to fill positions in agencies aligned with presidents' priorities—the very agencies where presidents should want to *enhance* performance—undercuts the logic of performance as a constraint (Kinane 2021; Piper 2022).

Finally, our findings are an important reminder that the rule of law in American democracy is not self-regulating, but rather requires political elites and the public to sanction deviations from constitutional procedures and norms. While the public sometimes functions as an effective guardrail against practices that bend or break the rule of law, the public punishment levied against elites is often limited, especially when individuals must consider tradeoffs between supporting the rule of law or elites who share their preferences (Carey et al. 2022; Christenson and Kriner 2017*a*). While the public constrains errant presidents under some circumstances, it is not a perfect fail-safe, and continued adherence to the rule of law relies on an interlocking set of institutional checks and balances and a commitment to democratic principles by both elites and rank-and-file citizens.

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# Supplemental Information

## Table of Contents



## List of Tables

# A Experimental Protocol

In this section, we describe the protocols and provide the vignettes and question wordings for our experiments.

Both our Executive Branch and FDA experiments were included in a survey fielded using Lucid Theorem on July 1 and 2, 2021.[1] Lucid Theorem is a survey respondent recruitment platform commonly used in political science research that supplies researchers with survey samples that are representative of the American public for common demographic characteristics such as race, gender, party identification, education, income, and age (Coppock and McClellan 2019). The 3,140 respondents in this survey who reached the module of our survey that contained our experiments were then randomly assigned to participate in either our Executive Branch experiment or our FDA experiment, and 3,108 of these respondents provided an answer for at least one of our post-treatment outcome questions (1,548 for the Executive Branch experiment, 1,560 for the FDA experiment).

Our FAA experiment was included in a survey fielded between February 24 and 28, 2023, using CloudResearch Connect, which is also a survey respondent recruitment platform that supplies researchers with survey samples that are representative of the American public for common demographic characteristics including age, gender, race, and ethnicity.[2] 1,170 respondents in this survey provided an answer for at least one of our post-treatment outcome questions.

In both surveys, after respondents provided consent to participate, they completed a battery of demographic questions and two attention check tasks drawn directly from and/or styled after those in Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances (2014).[3]

The descriptive statistics of the respondents who participated in each of the three experiments are presented in Table SI.1.

## A.1 Executive Branch Experiment

All respondents assigned to the Executive Branch experiment were presented with a vignette detailing President Joe Biden's progress in filling Presidential Appointments needing Senate confirmation (PAS) positions as of June 2021. This experiment was styled after an article in *The Wall Street Journal* on May 30, 2021, which reported on how Biden had appointed more individuals to thse positions at this point in his presidency than Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump had at the same stage of their presiencies, but that the Senate had confirmed fewer of his nominees than it had for Clinton, Bush, and Obama.[4]

Respondents in the control condition are provided only this information, while respondents in our treatment conditions receive additional text that closely follows the original article in *The Wall Street Journal*. First, respondents in the Acting Official treatment receive an additional sentence-length paragraph explaining that, because few of Biden's nominees had received Senate

[1] This survey was approved by the institutional review board at Vanderbilt University (#211236).

[2] This survey was approved by the institutional review board at East Tennessee State University (#c0223.6e-ETSU).

[3] In the first survey, our attention checks were the news source and feelings checks provided by Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances (2014). In the second survey, we again used the news source attention check, but our second attention check prompted respondents to indicate which Taylor Swift songs in the list below they had listened to in the past year, but, later in the prompt, specified two choices they should select to indicate they are paying attention.

[4] Thomas, Ken. "Biden Leads Predecessors in Nominations, Lags Behind in Confirmations," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2021, `https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-leads-predecessors-in-nominations-lags-in-confirmations-11622367002`.

confirmation, "some Cabinet-level departments in the executive branch of the US government are led by deputy secretaries and many key positions are filled with acting leadership." This text is meant to make salient for respondents that many officials holding leadership in the executive branch of the federal government at the time the experiment was fielded were acting officials. Second, Respondents in the Acting Official with Context treatment receive the same text as in the Acting Official treatment as well as an additional sentence asserting that "lack of Senate-confirmed leaders throughout the government can lead to delays in implementing executive actions and initiatives across the executive branch." The contents of the Acting Official with Context treatment are meant to not only make salient the presence of acting officials, but also to explain why acting officials can be detrimental for government performance. By including both treatment conditions, we can disentangle whether our treatment effects, if any are observed, are prompted by the mere mention of acting officials or if members of the public need to also receive contextual details about *why* acting officials can be problematic before utilizing that information to form their opinions.

After reading their assigned vignettes, respondents were asked a series of outcome questions about their perceptions of President Biden and the executive branch of the federal government. Two of these questions asked respondents whether they approved of President Biden's handling of his job as president and of his handling of the executive branch on a four-point scale. A separate set of four questions asked respondents to express their level of agreement with statements meant to measure their perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the executive branch. As we explain in Supplemental Information Section B, our main analyses binarize respondents' approval of President Biden and use the questions about respondents' perceptions of the executive branch's competence and legitimacy to construct scales for each concept.[5,6]

That *The Wall Street Journal* reported on presidential appointments and the presence of acting officials in leadership positions for the federal government heightens the external validity of this experiment because it demonstrates that major media organizations communicate information about vacancy appointments to members of the public, such that we can reasonably expect that people can encounter this information in their day-to-day lives. We further heighten external validity by hewing closely to the language in the original article in our vignettes, making only slight alterations for concision and/or grammatical correctness.

### A.1.1 Vignettes

Five months into his presidency, President Joe Biden has nominated agency heads and leaders throughout the federal government at a faster clip than his recent predecessors. By the beginning of June 2021, President Biden made 244 nominations to Senate-confirmed positions, which is more than double the number President Donald Trump made at the same stage of his administration. The pace of Mr. Biden's nominations for the roughly 1,200-Senate confirmed positions also surpasses those of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

[5]The two questions used to measure competence are original to the present study. The two questions used to measure legitimacy are adapted from the judicial legitimacy battery introduced by (Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003); while the original battery included six questions, we utilize only two which could be easily adapted to the present context.

[6]Because our pre-analysis plan anticipated that we would test whether respondents' perceptions of the federal government's competence and legitimacy mediate their evaluations of President Biden, we randomized whether respondents were first asked to indicate their approval of President Biden's handling of his job as president and of the executive branch or to provide their perceptions of the federal government's competence and legitimacy (Chaudoin, Gaines, and Livny 2021).

However, only 53 of President Biden's nominees had been confirmed by the Senate by the beginning of June 2021, a smaller number than were confirmed at that point in the administrations of Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama.

[INSERT TREATMENT HERE]

- Treatments
  - CONTROL: *Blank*
  - ACTING OFFICIAL TREATMENT: As a result, some Cabinet-level departments in the executive branch of the US government are led by deputy secretaries and many key positions are filled with acting leadership.
  - ACTING OFFICIAL WITH CONTEXT TREATMENT: As a result, some Cabinet-level departments in the executive branch of the US government are led by deputy secretaries and many key positions are filled with acting leadership. The lack of Senate-confirmed leaders throughout the government can lead to delays in implementing executive actions and initiatives across the executive branch.

### A.1.2 Post-Treatment Outcome Questions

- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as president?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is managing the executive branch of the US government?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- I trust that the executive branch makes decisions that are right for the country as a whole. *(Used to construct legitimacy scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust the executive branch to respond effectively to policy problems and crises. *(Used to construct competence scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- I trust that the executive branch is led by well-qualified individuals. *(Used to construct competence scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust that the executive branch's decisions do not favor some groups more than others. *(Used to construct legitimacy scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree

## A.2 FDA Experiment

All respondents assigned to the FDA experiment were presented with a vignette detailing the Food and Drug Administration's recent approval of, aducanumab, a new drug designed to treat Alzheimer's disease. The FDA's approval decision was criticized by many Alzheimer's experts who claimed that clinical trials did not provide sufficient evidence of the drug's efficacy, and subsequent reporting disclosed that multiple FDA internal advisory panels had recommended against its approval and alleged that executives of the pharmaceutical company, Biogen, Inc., had improper contact with regulators in the weeks leading up to the approval decision. At the time of aducanumab's approval, the FDA was headed by Dr. Janet Woodcock, a longtime FDA official who President Biden had appointed as acting commissioner.[7,8]

Respondents in the control condition read two short paragraphs about the FDA's approval of aducanumab drawn from contemporary media accounts,[9] explaining that the drug is designed to treat the underlying causes of Alzheimer's and that many Alzheimer's experts criticized the decision by "FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock" because clinical trials did not provide sufficient evidence of its efficacy.[10] Respondents in the Acting Official treatment read the same content as those in the control condition except that the decision was attributed to "Acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock." This slight addition was meant to make salient for respondents Woodcock's status as a vacancy appointee. Respondents in the Acting Official with Context treatment read the same common content with Woodcock identified as an acting official and received an additional paragraph communicating that "critics have expressed concern that the FDA's approval of aducanumab highlights the need for a permanent commissioner" and explained why the lack of a permanent commissioner may hamper the FDA's performance. The contents of the Acting Official with Context treatment are meant to not only make salient that Woodcock was an acting official, but also to explain why her presence as an acting official could have been detrimental for the agency's performance. By including both treatment conditions, we can disentangle whether our treatment effects, if any are observed, are prompted by the mere mention of Woodcock's acting status or if members

[7]Acting Commissioner Woodcock did not personally approve aducanumab, but instead left the decision to the director of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, who holds formal authority over drug approvals. However, as acting commissioner, Woodcock held ultimate authority over the decision and was a focal point of many media stories covering the drug's controversial approval.

[8]Belluck, Pam, Sheila Kaplan, And Rebecca Robbins. "How an Unproven Alzheimer's Drug Got Approved." *The New York Times*, July 19, 2021, `https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/19/health/alzheimers-drug-aduhelm-fda.html`; Kaplan, Sheila. "F.D.A. Still Lacks a Permanent Chief, Despite Pressing, Weighty Problems," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2021, `https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/12/health/fda-woodcock-agenda.html`; Owermohle, Sarah and Cancryn, Adam and Gardner, Lauren. "Controversial Drug Approval Stokes Concern About Lack of a Permanent FDA Chief," *Politico*, June 11, 2021, `https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/11/fda-woodcock-controversial-drug-approval-493324`.

[9]Kaplan, Sheila. "F.D.A. Still Lacks a Permanent Chief, Despite Pressing, Weighty Problems," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2021, `https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/12/health/fda-woodcock-agenda.html`; Owermohle, Sarah and Cancryn, Adam and Gardner, Lauren. "Controversial Drug Approval Stokes Concern About Lack of a Permanent FDA Chief," *Politico*, June 11, 2021, `https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/11/fda-woodcock-controversial-drug-approval-493324`.

[10]Initial reporting at the time of aducanumab's approval attributed the decision to Woodcock, who as acting commissioner held ultimate authority over the decision. Only later did Woodcock and FDA spokespeople later clarify that she was not personally involved in the approval decision. Thus, our framing of Woodcock as the key decisionmaker reflected contemporary media coverage (Belluck, Pam, Sheila Kaplan, And Rebecca Robbins. "How an Unproven Alzheimer's Drug Got Approved." *The New York Times*, July 19, 2021, `https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/19/health/alzheimers-drug-aduhelm-fda.html`).

of the public need to also receive contextual details about *why* Woodcock's acting status can be problematic before utilizing that information to form their opinions.

After reading their assigned vignettes, respondents were asked a series of outcome questions about their perceptions of President Biden and the FDA. Two of these questions asked respondents whether they approved of President Biden's handling of his job as president and of his handling of the FDA on a four-point scale. Another two questions asked respondents whether they approved of Commissioner Woodcock's handling of her job as FDA Commissioner and of the FDA's decision to approve aducanumab. A final set of four questions asked respondents to express their level of agreement with statements meant to measure their perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the FDA. As we explain in Supplemental Information Section B, our main analyses binarize respondents' approval of President Biden, Commissioner Woodcock, and the FDA's approval decision and use the questions about respondents' perceptions of the FDA's competence and legitimacy to construct scales for each concept.[11,12]

The external validity of this experiment is strong not only because it draws on a real-world agency decision made under an acting official that received considerable media attention, but also because several news stories published around the time of the FDA's approval of aducanumab highlighted Woodcock's role as an acting official and explicitly discussed why acting officials can be detrimental for agency performance. For instance, a *Politico* article titled "Controversial Drug Approval Stokes Concern About Lack of a Permanent FDA Chief" notes, "The lack of a politically appointed commissioner could hinder the FDA's ability to launch new initiatives or make major policy decisions like tobacco reform efforts. The agency is also whittling away a backlog of plant inspections and drug and medical device approvals."[13] Again, a *The New York Times* entitled "F.D.A. Still Lacks a Permanent Chief, Despite Pressing, Weighty Problems" mentions that "without a permanent commissioner, the agency lacks the leadership to set long-term goals and a new agenda in the first year of Mr. Biden's administration..."[14] This media focus demonstrates that we can reasonably expect that the public can be made aware of the presence and consequences of acting officials through news coverage when potential relevant to the main story being reported. Further, in designing our vignettes, we borrowed heavily from this language to ensure that the information to which we exposed our respondents aligns closely with that they could encounter in their everyday news consumption.

[11]The two questions used to measure competence are original to the present study. The two questions used to measure legitimacy are adapted from the judicial legitimacy battery introduced by (Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003); while the original battery included six questions, we utilize only two which could be easily adapted to the present context.

[12]Because our pre-analysis plan anticipated that we would test whether respondents' perceptions of the FDA's competence and legitimacy mediate their evaluations of President Biden, Commissioner Woodcock, and the FDA's decision, we randomized whether respondents were first asked to indicate their approval of President Biden, Commissioner Woodcock, and the FDA's decision or to provide their perceptions of the FDA's competence and legitimacy (Chaudoin, Gaines, and Livny 2021).

[13]Owermohle, Sarah and Cancryn, Adam and Gardner, Lauren. "Controversial Drug Approval Stokes Concern About Lack of a Permanent FDA Chief," *Politico*, June 11, 2021, `https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/11/fda-woodcock-controversial-drug-approval-493324`.

[14]Kaplan, Sheila. "F.D.A. Still Lacks a Permanent Chief, Despite Pressing, Weighty Problems," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2021, `https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/12/health/fda-woodcock-agenda.html`.

### A.2.1 Vignettes

In early June, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a new drug to treat Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's patient advocacy groups praised the FDA's decision on aducanumab, the first therapy approved to treat the underlying causes of the disease rather than merely managing its symptoms.

However, many medical experts have criticized the decision by FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock, whom President Joe Biden selected to lead the agency. An FDA advisory panel had previously recommended that the agency not approve aducanumab because clinical trials did not provide evidence that it is an effective treatment, and three of the panel's members resigned in protest after the FDA's decision.

[INSERT TREATMENT HERE]

- Treatments
  - CONTROL: *Blank*
  - ACTING OFFICIAL TREATMENT: Insert "Acting" in front of "FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock."
  - ACTING OFFICIAL WITH CONTEXT TREATMENT: Insert "Acting" in front of "FDA Commissioner Janet Woodock." Additionally, insert text following second paragraph: "Critics have also expressed concern that the FDA's approval of aducanumab highlights the need for a permanent commissioner to run the agency. Without a permanent commissioner, the agency lacks the leadership to launch new initiatives, make major policy decisions, and address a backlog of plant inspections and drug and medical device approvals. President Biden has not yet nominated a permanent FDA commissioner, and the White House has declined to answer reporters' questions on the delay."

### A.2.2 Post-Treatment Outcome Questions

- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as president?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is managing the FDA?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Janet Woodcock is handling her job as FDA Commissioner?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove

  - Strongly disapprove

- Do you agree or disagree with the FDA's approval of aducanumab, a new drug to treat Alzheimer's disease?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- I trust the FDA to make decisions that are right for the country as a whole. *(Used to construct legitimacy scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust the FDA to make sure the medicines used to prevent and treat disease are safe and effective. *(Used to construct competence scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust that the FDA is led by well-qualified individuals. *(Used to construct competence scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust that the FDA's decisions do not favor some groups more than others. *(Used to construct legitimacy scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree

## A.3 FAA Experiment

All respondents in the FAA experiment were asked to read a vignette about a computer system malfunction that the FAA experienced on Janaury 11, 2023. This malfunction concerning the FAA's Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM) system grounded all flights within the United States for 90 minutes and led to over 10,000 flight delays and 1,300 flight cancellations.[15] At the time of this malfunction, the FAA was headed by Billy Nolen, who had worked in aviation as a pilot and executive with over three decades of experience who President Biden had appointed as acting administrator.

Respondents in the control condition were presented with a short description of the FAA NOTAM outage and the FAA's immediate response. Respondents in each of the remaining two groups received the same information as those in the control condition along with information about the acting status of FAA Administrator Billy Nolan. In the Acting Official condition, respondents were told that Billy Nolan is the "Acting FAA Administrator" rather than the "FAA Administrator." This slight addition was intended to make salient for respondents Nolen's status as a vacancy appointee. In the Acting Official with Explanation condition, respondents read the same statement as in the Acting Official condition, along with an explanation that some critics argue that the outage "highlights the need for a permanent administrator to run the agency" because "the agency lacks the leadership to launch new initiatives, make major policy decisions, and address a backlog of approvals and certifications of aircraft and aircraft parts." The contents of the Acting Official with Context treatment are intended to not only make salient Nolen's acting status, but also explain why his presence as an acting official could have been detrimental for the agency's performance. Through including both treatment conditions, we can disentangle whether our treatment effects, if any are observed, are prompted by the mere mention of Nolen's acting status or if members of the public need to also receive contextual details about *why* Nolen's acting status can be problematic before utilizing that information to form their opinions.

After reading their assigned vignette, respondents were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of President Biden and the FAA. Two of these questions asking respondents whether they approved of Biden's handling of his job as president and of his handling of the FAA on a four-point scale. Another two questions asked respondents whether they approve of Administrator Nolen's handling of his job as FAA Administrator and of the FAA's handling of the system malfunction. Finally, respondents were asked the same four questions included in the FDA experiment concerning their perceptions of competence and legitimacy, but the subject of these questions was changed to the FAA.

As with the FDA experiment, the external validity of the FAA experiment is strong because is not only draws on a salient real-world event concerning a federal agency that, at the time of the governmental failure, was headed by an acting official, but also because media stories published around the time of the malfunction highlighted Nolen's role as an acting official and detailed why acting officials can hinder agency performance. For instance, a *CNN* article published shortly after the malfunction noted that "the FAA continues to be led by an acting administrator, and lacks a Senate-confirmed chief. That has real-world consequences for IT upgrades and other projects, according to a person familiar with the agency, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter more freely." This anonymous source is further quoted as saying, "It's really hard to set direction and vision when you don't know if you're going to be there for a week or you're going to

[15] Josephs, Leslie, "Flight disruptions ease after FAA outage but questions linger about system outage," *CNBC*, January 12, 2023, `https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/12/faa-notam-outage-flight-impact-eases.html`

be there for 18 months."[16] Another story published by *Reuters* highlighted Nolen's acting status before echoing statements from members of Congress bemoaning "the number of empty desks and vacant offices at the FAA" and emphasizing that "[the FAA] needs skilled, dedicated and permanent leadership in positions across the agency, starting with the administrator's office."[17] This media focus illustrates that we can reasonably expect that when agencies headed by acting officials become newsworthy, the media will highlight not only the officials' acting status but also communicate to the public the potential consequences for a lack of permanent leadership. We further sought to bolster external validity in designing our vignettes by borrowing heavily from language used in news stories published after the FAA's NOTAM malfunction; in doing so, we ensure that the information we included in our vignettes aligns closely with that they could encounter in their everyday news consumption.

### A.3.1 Vignettes

On January 11, 2023, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) grounded all flights within the United States for 90 minutes because one of its computer safety systems malfunctioned. This malfunction led to over 10,000 flight delays and over 1,300 flight cancellations, disrupting the plans of many travelers and causing frustration and confusion at airports nationwide.

Later that day, the FAA, under the direction of Administrator Billy Nolen, announced that it had traced the system malfunction to a damaged database file and would make the necessary repairs to prevent similar problems in the future.

[INSERT TREATMENT HERE]

- Treatments
  - CONTROL: *Blank*
  - ACTING OFFICIAL TREATMENT: Insert "Acting" in front of "Administrator Billy Nolen."
  - ACTING OFFICIAL WITH EXPLANATION TREATMENT: Insert "Acting" in front of "Administrator Billy Nolen." Additionally, insert text following second paragraph: "Many critics have also expressed concern that the FAA system outage highlights the need for a permanent administrator to run the agency. Without a permanent administrator, the agency lacks the leadership to launch new initiatives, make major policy decisions, and address a backlog of approvals and certifications of aircraft and aircraft parts. President Biden nominated a new FAA commissioner in July 2022, but the Senate has not yet confirmed Biden's nominee."

### A.3.2 Post-Treatment Outcome Questions

- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as president?

[16] Fung, Brian. "Aging, Outdated Technology Leaves Air Travel at Risk of Meltdown." *CNN*, January 13, 2023, `https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/13/business/airline-meltdowns`.

[17] Shepardson, David, "U.S. Congress to investigate FAA computer outage that snarled flights," *Reuters*, January 11, 2023, `https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-senate-commerce-committee-investigate-faa-computer-outage-2023-01-11/`.

  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is managing the FAA?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- Do you approve or disapprove of the way Billy Nolen is handling his job as FAA [Acting] Administrator?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- Do you approve or disapprove of the FAA's handling of the computer safety system malfunction it experienced on January 11, 2023?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- I trust the FAA to make decisions that are right for the country as a whole. *(To be used to construct legitimacy scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust the FAA to make sure that air travel is safe and efficient. *(To be used to construct competence scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust that the FAA is led by well-qualified individuals. *(To be used to construct competence scale)*
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- I trust that the FAA's decisions do not favor some groups more than others. *(To be used to construct legitimacy scale)*

– Strongly agree
– Somewhat agree
– Somewhat disagree
– Strongly disagree

## A.4 Comparison of Vignette Language to Universe of Media Coverage

In the foregoing subsections of Supplemental Information Section A, we describe how using real-world media coverage of acting officials as the premise of our vignettes heightens the external validity of our experiments. However, merely using real-world coverage of specific events does not provide insight on how common aspects of these vignettes are across the universe of media coverage of acting officials. In this subsection, we describe how exploratory analyses of two aspects of media coverage of acting officials lends further credibility to our designs—the use of the modifier "Acting" in front of acting officials' titles and the prevalence of discussions of presidential malintent in using acting officials to avoid the advise and consent process.

First, our Acting Official(s) and Acting Official(s) with Context treatments in the FDA and FAA experiments emphasize our identification of the featured officials as actings—Acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock and Acting FAA Administrator Billy Nolen. To demonstrate that media coverage involving acting officials routinely identifies those officials as serving in an acting capacity, such that our experimental manipulations mirror information typically conveyed to the public, we performed Nexis Uni searches of the names of each official with and without the word "acting" as part of the search in "Major U.S. Newspapers" during their terms of service. Of the 193 articles mentioning Janet Woodcock during her tenure as Acting FDA Commissioner (January 20, 2021 to February 17, 2022), 171 identified her as an acting official. Similarly, of the 31 articles mentioning Billy Nolen during his tenure as Acting FAA Administrator (April 1, 2022 to June 9, 2023), 26 identified him as an acting official. These search results indicate that the media consistently attaches the "acting" modifier to the titles of acting officials, such that this component of our treatment conditions mirrors real-world conditions.

Second, while our Acting Official(s) with Context treatments include discussion drawn from published media accounts of the potential negative consequences of acting officials for government performance, they do not explicitly communicate potential presidential malintent, or that the president may make use of acting officials to intentionally circumvent the Senate's advise and consent power (see Christenson and Kriner 2017*b*, for an example in unilateral policymaking contexts). If the media often communicates the specter of presidential malintent, either from its own journalists or as alleged by other political elites, and that this information causes the public to respond negatively towards presidents, it is possible that our null effects stem from the absence of this consideration in our experiments.

To get a sense of how often such information is conveyed to the public, we again performed Nexis Uni searches to identify articles published in "Major U.S. Newspapers" between 1980 and 2022 that mentioned acting officials that did or did not include words or phrases that may suggest presidential malintent. To isolate articles mentioning acting officials, we utilized the following search string: ("acting secretary" OR "acting deputy" OR "acting director" OR "acting commissioner" OR "acting administrator"). We then reran our search using the following string, which also required the presence of words or phrases which may be indicative of presidential malintent: ("acting secretary" OR "acting deputy" OR "acting director" OR "acting commissioner" OR "acting administrator") AND ("advise and consent" OR "unconstitutional" OR "constitutionality" OR "advice and consent" OR "circumvent" OR "get around" OR "senate-confirmed" OR "senate confirmed" OR "confirmation process"). We note that these terms are overly-inclusive so as to capture as many articles as possible that *may* discuss acting officials at the federal level and/or presidential malintent in the use of actings; for instance, our searches may have captured articles discussing state-level acting officials or of articles merely mentioning the absence of a "Senate-confirmed"

official without accusing the president of abrogating the Senate's advise and consent power.

Our Nexis Uni search returned 23,050 articles which mentioned acting officials. Of those articles, only 685, or 3.0%, also included one of the words or phrases indicative of presidential malintent. The proportion of articles mentioning acting officials that also allude to presidential malintent has been slightly elevated in recent years but remains substantively small; since 2017, the annual proportion of articles raising the possibility of presidential malintent has hovered between 5.6% and 8.0%. These search results suggest that the media seldom conveys information to the public about possible presidential malintent in the use of acting officials; therefore, even if the public would punish presidents when made aware that they are using acting officials to explicitly circumvent the Senate, the media rarely affords the public the opportunity to exercise such accountability over presidents.

## A.5 Respondent Descriptive Statistics

Table SI.1: Respondent Descriptive Characteristics

| Characteristic | Executive Branch (Lucid) | FDA (Lucid) | FAA (Connect) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | | |
| 18-29 | 23.3% (360) | 22.2% (347) | 22.1% (259) |
| 30-49 | 36.8% (569) | 35.4% (552) | 39.0% (456) |
| 50-64 | 22.7% (352) | 26.7% (416) | 27.7% (324) |
| 65 and over | 17.2% (267) | 15.7% (245) | 11.1% (130) |
| NA | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) | 0.1% (1) |
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 49.0% (759) | 52.4% (817) | 49.6% (580) |
| Male | 51.0% (789) | 47.6% (743) | 50.0% (585) |
| Other | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) | 0.3% (4) |
| NA | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) | 0.1% (1) |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | |
| White/Non-Hispanic | 64.5% (999) | 67.3% (1050) | 72.0% (842) |
| White/Hispanic | 5.3% (82) | 5.5% (86) | 8.4% (98) |
| Black/Non-Hispanic | 11.1% (172) | 10.9% (170) | 9.3% (109) |
| Black/Hispanic | 1.4% (21) | 1.3% (20) | 1.6% (19) |
| Asian | 6.6% (102) | 5.8% (91) | 5.4% (63) |
| Other | 10.0% (155) | 8.3% (130) | 3.2% (37) |
| NA | 1.1% (17) | 0.8% (13) | 0.2% (2) |
| Education | | | |
| High school degree or less | 22.0% (341) | 23.1% (361) | 10.9% (128) |
| Some college, no 4-year degree | 33.8% (523) | 35.3% (551) | 30.1% (352) |
| Bachelor's degree | 22.7% (351) | 23.2% (362) | 42.2% (494) |
| Post-graduate degree | 20.5% (318) | 17.8% (278) | 16.6% (194) |
| NA | 1.0% (15) | 0.5% (8) | 0.2% (2) |
| Income | | | |
| Less than $25,000 | 24.3% (376) | 23.8% (371) | 14.4% (168) |
| $25,000-$50,000 | 22.2% (344) | 23.4% (365) | 25.8% (302) |
| $50,000-$75,000 | 17.4% (270) | 16.5% (258) | 22.2% (260) |
| $75,000-$100,000 | 11.2% (174) | 10.5% (164) | 15.0% (176) |
| $100,000-$200,000 | 14.9% (230) | 15.6% (243) | 18.3% (214) |
| $200,000 or more | 2.8% (43) | 3.4% (53) | 4.3% (50) |
| NA | 7.2% (111) | 6.8% (106) | 0.0% (0) |
| Party Identification | | | |
| Democrat | 48.0% (743) | 46.0% (718) | 57.3% (670) |
| Independent | 10.8% (167) | 10.8% (169) | 11.5% (135) |
| Republican | 36.7% (568) | 38.2% (596) | 28.9% (338) |

| Characteristic | Executive Branch (Lucid) | FDA (Lucid) | FAA (Connect) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Other | 4.5% (70) | 4.9% (77) | 2.2% (26) |
| NA | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) | 0.1% (1) |
| Ideology | | | |
| Very liberal | 13.5% (209) | 14.0% (218) | 13.8% (162) |
| Liberal | 14.3% (22) | 15.6% (244) | 24.3% (284) |
| Slightly liberal | 9.0% (139) | 9.6% (150) | 14.2% (166) |
| Moderate | 34.4% (532) | 33.1% (517) | 20.9% (244) |
| Slightly conservative | 7.7% (119) | 7.2% (112) | 9.4% (110) |
| Conservative | 10.7% (165) | 11.1% (173) | 12.9% (151) |
| Very conservative | 9.8% (152) | 9.2% (143) | 4.5% (53) |
| NA | 0.6% (10) | 0.2% (3) | 0.0% (0) |

Note: This table indicates the percentage and number of respondents in each sample (denoted by the column headings) who reported each demographic characteristic (denoted by the row labels). Some characteristics may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

# B Empirical Analyses

In this section, we present the data and models used to create Figures 1 and 2 in the main paper and provide additional analyses to demonstrate the robustness of our results to alternative specifications and explore potential mediation effects.

All analyses include all respondents irrespective of attention check passage.[18] The substantive interpretation of our findings is consistent across all experiments when we use information about attention check passage to calculate complier average treatment effects (not shown here but available in the replication code accompanying this manuscript).[19]

Our pre-registration documents did not explicitly state threshold values for our null hypothesis significance tests. Because we eventually conducted a total of three experiments, each of which included three experimental conditions and between four and six outcomes, we elected ex post to apply Bonferroni corrections to account for multiple comparisons. We apply these corrections on the basis of the total number of hypothesis tests conducted within each model, comparing each treatment condition to the control condition. For instance, the Executive Branch experiment in Figure 1 in the main paper includes four outcomes and requires comparisons between the control condition and two different treatment conditions, for a total of eight hypothesis tests; thus, the Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha$ that corresponds to the conventional 95% confidence level is $\frac{0.05}{8} = 0.00625$. When moving to our copartisanship-conditional analyses in Figure 2, the number of hypothesis tests per model doubles because we compare the estimates for each treatment condition among copartisans and non-copartisans, separately, to the corresponding control condition.[20]

## B.1 Outcome Measures

While the original outcome questions that relate to respondents' approval of President Biden, the FDA, and the FAA were originally measured on four-point scales from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree," we transformed these measures to binary indicators—"Strongly or somewhat disagree" (0) and "Strongly or somewhat agree" (1)—for ease of exposition in Figures 1 and 2 in the main paper. In doing so, we are able to interpret treatment effect estimates as percentage point differences in the mean level of approval expressed by respondents in a given treatment condition to the mean level of approval among control condition respondents (e.g., a treatment effect of -0.03 represents a 3 percentage point decrease in approval relative to the control condition).

Alternatively, we measure respondents' perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the executive branch, FDA, and FAA using two-question scales (see Supplemental Information Section A for question wordings). Each question asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement about a statement concerning the executive branch, FDA, and FAA's competence and legitimacy on a

[18] Attention check rates for each of our experiments were as follows: for the Executive Branch experiment, 299 (19.3%) passed both attention checks, 517 (33.4%) passed one of the two attention checks, and 732 (47.3%) passed neither attention check; for the FDA experiment, 333 (21.3%) passed both attention checks, 477 (30.6%) passed one of the two attention checks, and 750 (48.1%) passed neither attention check; and for the FAA experiment, 1007 (86.1%) passed both attention checks, 131 (11.2%) passed one of the two attention checks, and 32 (2.7%) passed neither attention check

[19] Specifically, we re-estimate the models in Tables SI.2, SI.3, SI.4, SI.5, SI.6, and SI.7 to obtain the complier average causal effects (CACEs) by using an instrumental variables framework. While the magnitudes of the CACEs are naturally larger than the treatment effects presented here, the substantive interpretations of our results are largely consistent

[20] For our causal mediation analyses, we do not implement multiple comparisons adjustments.

four-point scale, and we use as our measure of respondents' perceptions of each concept the average the numerical values corresponding with respondents' answers to each pair of questions. Thus, the treatment effects which correspond to these outcome measures in Figures 1 and 2 in the main paper represent the change in the mean rating provided by respondents in each treatment condition on a four-point scale relative to the mean rating provided by the respondents in the control condition The internal consistency of our scales is high, with Cronbach's $\alpha$ exceeding 0.80 for each scale ($\alpha = 0.90$ for Executive Branch competence, $\alpha = 0.84$ for Executive Branch legitimacy, $\alpha = 0.85$ for FDA competence, $\alpha = 0.80$ for FDA legitimacy, $\alpha = 0.87$ for FAA competence, $\alpha = 0.80$ for FAA legitimacy).

## B.2 Robustness Checks

The tabular summaries of the linear regression models used to create the figures in the main paper are presented in Tables SI.2, SI.3, and SI.4, (Figure 1) and Tables SI.5, SI.6, and SI.7 (Figure 2). Because these models used binarized versions of some of our outcome measures (noted at the beginning of this section), we also provide summaries of analogous linear regression models which employ the original four-point scales for these outcomes in Tables SI.8-SI.13. The substantive interpretation of the estimates in these models are consistent with those made when using the corresponding binarized outcomes across each of the three experiments.

## B.3 Causal Mediation Analyses

In our pre-analysis plan, we anticipated that respondents' perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the executive branch, FDA, and FAA would mediate the effect of our treatments on respondents' evaluations of the job performance and policy decisions made by President Biden, the executive branch, the FDA, and the FAA. To evaluate these expectations, we use causal mediation, which enables us to recover unbiased estimates of the average direct effect (ADE), or the effect of our treatments themselves on the outcomes, and the average causal mediation effect (ACME), or the effect of the treatments on the outcomes through each of the posited mediators (Imai et al. 2011).

We conduct our causal mediation analyses using the two-step estimation procedure outlined by (Imai et al. 2011) and implemented in the `mediation` package in `R` (Tingley et al. 2014).[21] For both steps, we use linear regression models and the transformed versions of our outcomes measures utilized in our analyses in the main paper (i.e., binarized versions of respondents' evaluations of

[21]The estimation procedure in (Imai et al. 2011) assumes that the posited mediators are independent, which is likely not the case in the present circumstance, as perceptions of the competence and legitimacy of the executive branch or individual agencies may be related. To account for the potential for causal dependence and individual-level heterogeneity in the interactive effect between our treatments and posited mediators, we repeated our causal mediation analyses for those cases where we initially detected a mediation effect using the procedure outlined in (Imai and Yamamoto 2013) and implemented through the `multimed` function in `mediation`. These analyses (not shown here, but to be included in our replication archive) indicate that our mediation effects remain statistically distinguishable at the 95% confidence level when accounting for causal dependence and under the homogeneous interaction assumption, though at smaller magnitudes than those reported here. However, our sensitivity analyses, which assess robustness to violations of the homogeneous interaction assumption, suggest that our results are not robust to more than low levels of individual-level heterogeneity in the interactive effect between our treatments and posited mediators, as our mediated effects are no longer distinguishable when the value of the $\sigma$ parameter exceeds 20% to 30% of its maximum value across unique mediator/outcome specifications.

respondents' approval of President Biden, the executive branch, the FDA, and the FAA, and two-question scales of respondents' perceptions of competence and legitimacy). We use 1000 simulations to estimate our quantities of interest and obtain uncertainty measures through bootstrapping.

We present the results of our causal medation analyses for our unconditional treatment effects (i.e., the effects of our treatments on our outcomes without conditioning by copartisanship, as performed for Figure 1), in Tables SI.14-SI.33.[22] Across outcome measures and treatment conditions, we find no evidence that respondents' perceptions of legitimacy or competence mediate the effect of our treatments on our outcome measures for the executive branch and FDA experiments, but we do find that the negative perceptions expressed by Acting Official with Context respondents towards FAA Administrator Billy Nolen and the FAA's handling of its system malfunction are mediated by respondents' perceptions of the FAA's competence and legitimacy (see Tables SI.28, SI.29, SI.32, and SI.33).

[22]We also performed our causal mediation analyses on the subsets of respondents who identified as copartisans and did not identify as non-copartisans, separately. These analyses are not included here but will be available in our replication archive.

Table SI.2: Executive Branch Experiment, Unconditional Effects

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. Exec. Handling | Exec. Branch Competence | Exec. Branch Legitimacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.61* | 0.62* | 2.71* | 2.64* |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Acting | −0.01 | −0.02 | −0.03 | 0.02 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Acting w/ | −0.02 | −0.03 | −0.05 | −0.06 |
| Context | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Num. obs. | 1547 | 1546 | 1536 | 1539 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are told only about how many nominees Biden has, not that most have not been confirmed. The first and second models use as outcome measures dichotomized versions of the original approval questions, where "strongly disapprove" and "somewhat disapprove" are coded as 0 and "somewhat approve" and "strongly approve" are coded as 1. Third and fourth models use as outcome measures scales ranging from 1 to 4 which reflect respondents' appraisals of the executive branch's competence and legitimacy, respectively.

Table SI.3: FDA Experiment, Unconditional Effects

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FDA Handling | FDA Comm. Approval | FDA Decision Approval | FDA Competence | FDA Legitimacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.58* | 0.57* | 0.59* | 0.67* | 2.92* | 2.78* |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Acting | −0.02 | 0.00 | −0.01 | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.07 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting w/ | 0.05 | −0.02 | −0.00 | −0.02 | 0.03 | 0.07 |
| Context | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Num. obs. | 1554 | 1552 | 1551 | 1554 | 1546 | 1546 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FDA does not have a confirmed commissioner. The first through fourth models use as outcome measures dichotomized versions of the original approval questions, where "strongly disapprove" and "somewhat disapprove" are coded as 0 and "somewhat approve" and "strongly approve" are coded as 1. Fifth and sixth models use as outcome measures scales ranging from 1 to 4 which reflect respondents' appraisals of the FDA's competence and legitimacy, respectively.

Table SI.4: FAA Experiment, Unconditional Effects

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FAA Handling | FAA Admin. Approval | FAA Handling Approval | FAA Competence | FAA Legitimacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.53* | 0.63* | 0.72* | 0.72* | 3.12* | 2.99* |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Acting | −0.00 | −0.02 | 0.00 | −0.02 | −0.02 | −0.08 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting w/ | 0.05 | −0.00 | −0.11* | −0.18* | −0.18* | −0.22* |
| Context | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Num. obs. | 1168 | 1168 | 1169 | 1168 | 1169 | 1170 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FAA does not have a confirmed administrator. The first through fourth models use as outcome measures dichotomized versions of the original approval questions, where "strongly disapprove" and "somewhat disapprove" are coded as 0 and "somewhat approve" and "strongly approve" are coded as 1. Fifth and sixth models use as outcome measures scales ranging from 1 to 4 which reflect respondents' appraisals of the FAA's competence and legitimacy, respectively.

Table SI.5: Executive Branch Experiment, Partisanship-Conditional

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. Exec. Handling | Exec. Branch Competence | Exec. Branch Legitimacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.35* | 0.35* | 2.24* | 2.20* |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting | −0.03 | −0.03 | −0.01 | 0.07 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting w/ | −0.03 | −0.02 | −0.06 | −0.03 |
| Context | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Pres. Copart. | 0.54* | 0.55* | 0.96* | 0.90* |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Acting: | 0.05 | 0.01 | −0.03 | −0.07 |
| Pres. Copart | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Acting w/ | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.03 | −0.03 |
| Context: | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Pres. Copart | | | | |
| Num. obs. | 1547 | 1546 | 1536 | 1539 |

*$p < 0.05$. Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are told only about how many nominees Biden has, not that most have not been confirmed. Omitted category for copartisanship is non-presidential copartisan, which is any respondent who does not identify as a Democrat. The first and second models use as outcome measures dichotomized versions of the original approval questions, where "strongly disapprove" and "somewhat disapprove" are coded as 0 and "somewhat approve" and "strongly approve" are coded as 1. Third and fourth models use as outcome measures scales ranging from 1 to 4 which reflect respondents' appraisals of the executive branch's competence and legitimacy, respectively.

Table SI.6: FDA Experiment, Partisanship-Conditional

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FDA Handling | FDA Comm. Approval | FDA Decision Approval | FDA Competence | FDA Legitimacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.32* | 0.32* | 0.43* | 0.58* | 2.62* | 2.47* |
| | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting | −0.03 | 0.02 | −0.00 | 0.01 | 0.07 | 0.11 |
| | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting w/ | 0.09* | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.12 |
| Context | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Pres. Copart. | 0.56* | 0.54* | 0.36* | 0.18* | 0.64* | 0.66* |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting: | 0.04 | −0.02 | −0.01 | −0.00 | −0.05 | −0.06 |
| Pres. Copart | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.10) | (0.10) |
| Acting w/ | −0.07 | −0.12 | −0.13 | −0.05 | −0.04 | −0.08 |
| Context: | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.10) | (0.10) |
| Pres. Copart | | | | | | |
| Num. obs. | 1554 | 1552 | 1551 | 1554 | 1546 | 1546 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category for experimental condition is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FDA does not have a confirmed commissioner. Omitted category for copartisanship is non-presidential copartisan, which is any respondent who does not identify as a Democrat. The first and second models use as outcome measures dichotomized versions of the original approval questions, where "strongly disapprove" and "somewhat disapprove" are coded as 0 and "somewhat approve" and "strongly approve" are coded as 1. Fifth and sixth models use as outcome measures scales ranging from 1 to 4 which reflect respondents' appraisals of the FDA's competence and legitimacy, respectively.

Table SI.7: FAA Experiment, Partisanship-Conditional

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FAA Handling | FAA Admin. Approval | FAA Handling Approval | FAA Competence | FAA Legitimacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.20* | 0.39* | 0.64* | 0.67* | 2.96* | 2.88* |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Acting | −0.08 | −0.10 | −0.05 | −0.08 | −0.10 | −0.18 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Acting w/ | 0.00 | −0.05 | −0.16* | −0.23* | −0.19 | −0.26* |
| Context | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Pres. Copart. | 0.59* | 0.42* | 0.14* | 0.09 | 0.28* | 0.20 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting: | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.09 | 0.10 | 0.15 | 0.18 |
| Pres. Copart | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.10) | (0.11) |
| Acting w/ | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.09 | −0.00 | 0.07 |
| Context: | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Pres. Copart | | | | | | |
| Num. obs. | 1167 | 1167 | 1168 | 1167 | 1168 | 1169 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category for experimental condition is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FAA does not have a confirmed administrator. Omitted category for copartisanship is non-presidential copartisan, which is any respondent who does not identify as a Democrat. The first and second models use as outcome measures dichotomized versions of the original approval questions, where "strongly disapprove" and "somewhat disapprove" are coded as 0 and "somewhat approve" and "strongly approve" are coded as 1. Fifth and sixth models use as outcome measures scales ranging from 1 to 4 which reflect respondents' appraisals of the FAA's competence and legitimacy, respectively.

Table SI.8: Executive Branch Experiment, Unconditional Effects (Four-Point Outcome Scales)

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. Exec. Handling |
|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 2.70* | 2.69* |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting | −0.06 | −0.06 |
| | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting w/ | −0.07 | −0.07 |
| Context | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Num. obs. | 1547 | 1546 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are told only about how many nominees Biden has, not that most have not been confirmed. Models use as outcome measures the original four-point approval questions.

Table SI.9: FDA Experiment, Unconditional Effects (Four-Point Outcome Scales)

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FDA Handling | FDA Comm. Approval | FDA Decision Approval |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 2.62* | 2.57* | 2.63* | 2.78* |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Acting | −0.04 | 0.02 | −0.02 | 0.02 |
| | (0.07) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting w/ | 0.11 | −0.02 | 0.01 | −0.03 |
| Context | (0.07) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.05) |
| Num. obs. | 1554 | 1552 | 1551 | 1554 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FDA does not have a confirmed commissioner. Models use as outcome measures the original four-point approval questions.

Table SI.10: FAA Experiment, Unconditional Effects (Four-Point Outcome Scales)

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FAA Handling | FAA Admin. Approval | FAA Handling Approval |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 2.45* | 2.62* | 2.83* | 2.87* |
| | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Acting | −0.03 | −0.03 | −0.03 | −0.04 |
| | (0.08) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Acting w/Explanation | 0.11 | 0.02 | −0.24* | −0.36* |
| | (0.08) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Num. obs. | 1168 | 1168 | 1169 | 1168 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FAA does not have a confirmed administrator Models use as outcome measures the original four-point approval questions.

Table SI.11: Executive Branch Experiment, Partisanship-Conditional (Four-Point Outcome Scales)

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. Exec. Handling |
|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 2.04* | 2.05* |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Acting | −0.09 | −0.06 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Acting w/ | −0.06 | −0.06 |
| Context | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Pres. Copart. | 1.34* | 1.30* |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Acting: | 0.10 | 0.02 |
| Pres. Copart | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Acting w/ | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| Context: | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Pres. Copart | | |
| Num. obs. | 1547 | 1546 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category for experimental condition is the control condition, where respondents are told only about how many nominees Biden has, not that most have not been confirmed. Omitted category for copartisanship is non-presidential copartisan, which is any respondent who does not identify as a Democrat. Models use as outcome measures the original four-point approval questions.

Table SI.12: FDA Experiment, Partisanship-Conditional (Four-Point Outcome Scales)

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FDA Handling | FDA Comm. Approval | FDA Decision Approval |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 1.93* | 1.99* | 2.30* | 2.58* |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Acting | −0.04 | 0.08 | −0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting w/ | 0.22* | 0.14 | 0.11 | 0.02 |
| Context | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Pres. Copart. | 1.46* | 1.24* | 0.70* | 0.42* |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Acting: | 0.09 | −0.08 | −0.00 | 0.02 |
| Pres. Copart | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.10) |
| Acting w/ | −0.21 | −0.31 | −0.20 | −0.11 |
| Context: | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.11) |
| Pres. Copart | | | | |
| Num. obs. | 1554 | 1552 | 1551 | 1554 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category for experimental condition is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FDA does not have a confirmed commissioner. Omitted category for copartisanship is non-presidential copartisan, which is any respondent who does not identify as a Democrat. Models use as outcome measures the original four-point approval questions.

Table SI.13: FAA Experiment, Partisanship-Conditional (Four-Point Outcome Scales)

| | Pres. Approval | Pres. FAA Handling | FAA Admin. Approval | FAA Handling Approval |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 1.70* | 2.12* | 2.72* | 2.76* |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Acting | −0.23 | −0.15 | −0.21 | −0.21 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.09) |
| Acting w/ | −0.01 | −0.02 | −0.36* | −0.47* |
| Context | (0.09) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.09) |
| Pres. Copart. | 1.32* | 0.89* | 0.20 | 0.19 |
| | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.08) |
| Acting: | 0.33 | 0.21 | 0.31 | 0.30 |
| Pres. Copart | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.12) |
| Acting w/ | 0.15 | 0.03 | 0.20 | 0.18 |
| Context: | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.12) |
| Pres. Copart | | | | |
| Num. obs. | 1167 | 1167 | 1168 | 1167 |

*$p < 0.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected, see introduction to Supplemental Information Section B.) Omitted category is the control condition, where respondents are not told that the FAA does not have a confirmed administrator. Omitted category for copartisanship is non-presidential copartisan, which is any respondent who does not identify as a Democrat. Models use as outcome measures the original four-point approval questions.

Table SI.14: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Presidential Approval (Executive Branch Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Officials | ACME | -0.01 | [-0.05, 0.03] |
| (N=1032) | ADE | 0.00 | [-0.04, 0.05] |
| | Total Effect | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 1.09 | [-5.71, 7.49] |
| Acting Officials | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.06, 0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.00 | [-0.05, 0.05] |
| (N=986) | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 1.02 | [-7.10, 5.93] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of his job as president, as mediated by perceptions of the executive branch's competence, in the Executive Branch experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.15: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and President's Handling of Executive Branch (Executive Branch Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Officials | ACME | -0.01 | [-0.05, 0.03] |
| (N=1031) | ADE | -0.01 | [-0.06, 0.03] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.40 | [-4.13, 4.07] |
| Acting Officials | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.06, 0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.00 | [-0.05, 0.04] |
| (N=985) | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.83 | [-5.16, 6.92] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of the executive branch, as mediated by perceptions of the executive branch's competence, in the Executive Branch experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.16: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Presidential Approval (Executive Branch Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Officials | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.03, 0.05] |
| (N=1033) | ADE | -0.02 | [-0.06, 0.03] |
| | Total Effect | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.84 | [-6.17, 6.88] |
| Acting Officials | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.06, 0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.00 | [-0.05, 0.05] |
| (N=991) | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.99 | [-4.44, 9.69] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of his job as president, as mediated by perceptions of the executive branch's legitimacy, in the Executive Branch experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.17: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and President's Handling of Executive Branch (Executive Branch Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Officials | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.03, 0.05] |
| (N=1032) | ADE | -0.03 | [-0.08, 0.01] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.33 | [-7.74, 6.68] |
| Acting Officials | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.06, 0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.01 | [-0.05, 0.04] |
| (N=990) | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.77 | [-6.04, 5.48] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of the executive branch, as mediated by perceptions of the executive branch's legitimacy, in the Executive Branch experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.18: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Presidential Approval (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.04] |
| (N=1042) | ADE | -0.03 | [-0.08, 0.02] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.46 | [-6.80, 8.09] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.04] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.05 | [-0.01, 0.10] |
| (N=1022) | Total Effect | 0.05 | [-0.01, 0.11] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.16 | [-0.73, 1.66] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of his job as president, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's competence, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.19: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Handling of the FDA (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.04] |
| (N=1040) | ADE | -0.01 | [-0.06, 0.05] |
| | Total Effect | 0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 8.74 | [-10.61, 5.82] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.04] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.02 | [-0.07, 0.03] |
| (N=1022) | Total Effect | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.63 | [-5.23, 8.71] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of the FDA, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's competence, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.20: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and FDA Commissioner Approval (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.04] |
| (N=1039) | ADE | -0.03 | [-0.08, 0.02] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.64 | [-7.45, 8.48] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.04] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.01 | [-0.06, 0.05] |
| (N=1021) | Total Effect | -0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -3.18 | [-8.72, 5.41] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Janet Woodcock's handling of her job as FDA commissioner, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's competence, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.21: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Approval of FDA's Approval of Aducanumab (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.01, 0.03] |
| (N=1042) | ADE | -0.00 | [-0.05, 0.05] |
| | Total Effect | 0.00 | [-0.05, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 1.74 | [-5.56, 5.63] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.02, 0.03] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.02 | [-0.07, 0.04] |
| (N=1023) | Total Effect | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.50 | [-4.50, 5.04] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of the FDA's decision to approve aducanumab, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's competence, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.22: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Presidential Approval (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01, 0.05] |
| (N=1042) | ADE | -0.04 | [-0.10, 0.01] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.80 | [-14.53, 11.19] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01 0.05] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.03 | [-0.02, 0.09] |
| (N=1023) | Total Effect | 0.05 | [-0.01, 0.12] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.38 | [-0.86, 2.27] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of his job as president, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's legitimacy, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.23: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Handling of the FDA (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01, 0.05] |
| (N=1040) | ADE | -0.02 | [-0.07, 0.03] |
| | Total Effect | 0.00 | [-0.06, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 14.13 | [-8.57, 12.74] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01, 0.05] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.04 | [-0.09, 0.01] |
| (N=1023) | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.07, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -1.20 | [-9.08, 10.32] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of the FDA, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's legitimacy, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.24: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and FDA Commissioner Approval (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01, 0.05] |
| (N=1039) | ADE | -0.04 | [-0.09, 0.02] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -1.19 | [-11.76, 11.26] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01, 0.05] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.03 | [-0.08, 0.03] |
| (N=1022) | Total Effect | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -2.83 | [-11.60, 13.04] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Janet Woodcock's handling of her job as FDA commissioner, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's legitimacy, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.25: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Approval of FDA's Decision to Approve Aducanumab (FDA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.01 | [-0.01, 0.04] |
| (N=1042) | ADE | -0.01 | [-0.06, 0.04] |
| | Total Effect | 0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 4.60 | [-7.31, 7.58] |
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.02 | [-0.01, 0.04] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.03 | [-0.08, 0.03] |
| (N=1024) | Total Effect | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -1.02 | [-7.80, 8.15] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of the FDA's decision to approve aducanumab, as mediated by perceptions of the FDA's legitimacy, in the FDA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.26: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Presidential Approval (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | 0.00 | [-0.03, 0.02] |
| (N=818) | ADE | 0.00 | [-0.07, 0.07] |
| | Total Effect | 0.00 | [ -0.07, 0.07] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -12.45 | [-2.79, 6.58] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.04* | [-0.06, -0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.09* | [0.02, 0.15] |
| (N=775) | Total Effect | 0.05 | [-0.01, 0.11] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.75 | [-7.82, 7.27] |

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of his job as president, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's competence, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method). Please note that the estimate for the proportion of the effect mediated for those in the Acting Official condition vs. the Control condition falls outside of the 95% confidence interval; this is a mechanical consequence of the `mediation` package estimating the proportion mediated and the confidence interval through separate calculations that, when no mediation effect is present, can yield inconsistent values.

Table SI.27: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Handling of the FAA (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.00 | [-0.03, 0.02] |
| (N=818) | ADE | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Total Effect | -0.03 | [-0.09, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.18 | [-4.37, 2.42] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.05* | [-0.08, -0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.05 | [-0.01, 0.11] |
| (N=777) | Total Effect | -0.00 | [-0.07, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 17.72 | [-16.90, 17.97] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of the FAA, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's competence, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method). Please note that the estimate for the proportion of the effect mediated for those in the Acting Official with Context condition vs. the Control condition is nearly equal to the upper bound of the 95% confidence interval; this is a mechanical consequence of the `mediation` package estimating the proportion mediated and the confidence interval through separate calculations that, when no mediation effect is present, can yield inconsistent values.

Table SI.28: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and FAA Administrator Approval (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.01 | [-0.04, 0.03] |
| (N=819) | ADE | 0.01 | [-0.05, 0.06] |
| | Total Effect | -0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 8.16 | [-4.45, 8.10] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.06* | [-0.10, -0.03] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.05 | [-0.11, 0.00] |
| (N=777) | Total Effect | -0.11* | [-0.19, -0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.56* | [0.30, 1.05] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Billy Nolan's handling of his job as FAA administrator, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's competence, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method). Please note that the estimate for the proportion of the effect mediated for those in the Acting Official condition vs. the Control condition falls outside of the 95% confidence interval; this is a mechanical consequence of the `mediation` package estimating the proportion mediated and the confidence interval through separate calculations that, when no mediation effect is present, can yield inconsistent values.

Table SI.29: Causal Mediation Analysis—Competence and Approval of FAA's Handling of System Malfunction (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.00 | [-0.03, 0.03] |
| (N=818) | ADE | -0.01 | [-0.07, 0.05] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.28 | [-4.49, 4.70] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.05* | [-0.08, -0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.12* | [-0.18, -0.06] |
| (N=776) | Total Effect | -0.18* | [-0.25, -0.11] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.31* | [0.14, 0.50] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of the FAA's handling of its system malfunction, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's competence, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the competence scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.30: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Presidential Approval (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.04, 0.00] |
| (N=819) | ADE | 0.01 | [-0.05, 0.07] |
| | Total Effect | -0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 19.33 | [-6.26, 7.64] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.04* | [-0.07, -0.02] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.09* | [0.03, 0.16] |
| (N=776) | Total Effect | 0.05 | [-0.02, 0.12] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -0.85 | [ -9.25, 5.94] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of his job as president, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's legitimacy, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method). Please note that the estimate for the proportion of the effect mediated for those in the Acting Official condition vs. the Control condition falls outside of the 95% confidence interval; this is a mechanical consequence of the `mediation` package estimating the proportion mediated and the confidence interval through separate calculations that, when no mediation effect is present, can yield inconsistent values.

Table SI.31: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Handling of the FAA (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.05, 0.01] |
| (N=819) | ADE | -0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.09, 0.05] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.80 | [-4.44, 6.29] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.05* | [-0.08, -0.03] |
| with Context | ADE | 0.05 | [-0.01, 0.12] |
| (N=778) | Total Effect | -0.00 | [-0.07, 0.07] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 39.83 | [-18.44, 21.09] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Joe Biden's handling of the FAA, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's legitimacy, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method). Please note that the estimate for the proportion of the effect mediated for those in the Acting Official with Context condition vs. the Control condition falls outside of the 95% confidence interval; this is a mechanical consequence of the `mediation` package estimating the proportion mediated and the confidence interval through separate calculations that, when no mediation effect is present, can yield inconsistent values.

Table SI.32: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and FAA Administrator Approval (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.06, 0.01] |
| (N=820) | ADE | 0.03 | [-0.02, 0.08] |
| | Total Effect | 0.00 | [-0.06, 0.06] |
| | Prop. Mediated | -26.10 | [-15.64, 13.79] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.07* | [-0.10, -0.03] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.04 | [-0.10, 0.01] |
| (N=778) | Total Effect | -0.11* | [-0.18, -0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.61* | [ 0.35, 1.25] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of Billy Nolan's handling of his job as FAA administrator, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's legitimacy, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method). Please note that the estimate for the proportion of the effect mediated for those in the Acting Official condition vs. the Control condition falls outside of the 95% confidence interval; this is a mechanical consequence of the `mediation` package estimating the proportion mediated and the confidence interval through separate calculations that, when no mediation effect is present, can yield inconsistent values.

Table SI.33: Causal Mediation Analysis—Legitimacy and Approval of FAA's Handling of System Malfunction (FAA Experiment)

| Context | Causal Quantity | Estimate | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.02 | [-0.05, 0.01] |
| (N=819) | ADE | 0.00 | [-0.05, 0.06] |
| | Total Effect | -0.02 | [-0.08, 0.04] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 1.23 | [-5.22, 9.41] |
| Acting Official | ACME | -0.06* | [-0.09, -0.03] |
| with Context | ADE | -0.12* | [-0.19, -0.06] |
| (N=777) | Total Effect | -0.18* | [-0.25, -0.11] |
| | Prop. Mediated | 0.32* | [0.17, 0.52] |

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the effect of our treatments on approval of the FAA's handling of its system malfunction, as mediated by perceptions of the FAA's legitimacy, in the FAA experiment. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in this table are a consequence of a small number of respondents who did not provide answers for both the outcome question and the two questioned used to construct the legitimacy scale and thus drop out of the analysis. We conducted these analyses with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

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