

Public Opinion and the Politicization of Federal Agencies

Abstract

The ability of federal agencies to secure support for their initiatives and mission depends, in part, on their reputation in the eyes of the public. An important, but under-explored dimension of bureaucratic reputation is public perceptions of agencies' political motivations. I argue that federal agencies that appear in news coverage as motivated by politics instead of principles will receive less specific and diffuse support from the public. Importantly, the negative effects of politicization are expected to be strongest for agencies perceived *ex ante* as ideologically moderate. I begin with a content analysis which reveals that nearly half of all coverage of federal agencies portrays those agencies as political or strategic actors. Then, I conduct a survey experiment where respondents read a news article about an agency head's efforts to implement new policy guidelines, motivated either by politics or by principles. Support for my expectations regarding the negative effects of politicization is only found among Democrats.

Keywords: bureaucratic reputation, politicization, public opinion, survey experiments

Word Count: 9,113

¹The author declares no conflict of interests.

²Replication materials are available upon request.

The ability of federal agencies to successfully implement policy depends, in part, on their ability to gather support from the mass public. Recent work at the intersection of public administration and public opinion has sought to identify the factors that generate that support (e.g., Lee and Van Ryzin 2020; Teodoro and An 2018), and have found that bureaucratic reputation (Carpenter and Krause 2012)—or beliefs about what an agency is, does, and is capable of—plays a key role. An important, but unexplored, dimension of bureaucratic reputation that may also shape the public’s attitudes towards federal agencies is beliefs about an agency’s political motivations. Although they are typically considered politically neutral institutions, agencies can sometimes appear as politically-motivated, such as when presidents strategically appoint an ideologically similar agency head to steer the agency’s policy priorities (Lewis 2008; Moe 1985).¹ Especially in today’s divisive political environment, events such as these that portray federal agencies as political bodies may then become the subject of media attention, thereby opening a pathway through bureaucratic reputation—and therefore public support—may be shaped. How do politicized portrayals of federal agencies shape public support for those agencies and their initiatives?

In this project, I argue that agencies that appear motivated by political considerations as opposed to the core principles and values of an agency will receive less specific support—or support for the performance and policy outputs of the agency—and diffuse support—or more stable beliefs about the legitimacy of an agency (Easton 1975)—from the mass public. I motivate this argument by looking to findings from the judicial politics literature (e.g., Hitt and Searles 2018; Gibson and Caldeira 2009), which has shown that support for that institution and its outputs can be damaged when the Court is portrayed in media as engaged in political processes. However, I also consider that, unlike the Supreme Court, there are

¹An important note on terminology: scholars of public administration use the word “politicization” to refer specifically to the process whereby a president appoints an ideologically-similar agency head to steer the policy direction of an agency (e.g., Richardson 2019). Scholars of public opinion apply the term in a more encompassing manner, using “politicization” to describe any instance in which objects or actors are framed as politically- or strategically-driven, especially those driven by partisan politics (e.g., the politicization of sports coverage, Peterson and Muñoz 2020). I will generally use the term “politicization” in its broadest sense unless stated otherwise.

numerous federal agencies and not all are perceived *ex ante* as apolitical or ideologically-centrist (Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2018; Clinton et al. 2012). Insofar as ideological tendencies represent political motivation, I argue that the public will hold higher standards for agencies typically considered ideologically moderate (e.g., United States Postal Service), and to punish those agencies to a greater extent when they appear politicized compared to agencies typically seen as ideologically-driven (e.g., Environmental Protection Agency).

This project takes a two-step empirical approach to understand how the politicization of federal agencies shapes attitudes towards them. I begin with a content analysis of mainstream news sources in order to characterize the types of coverage received by federal agencies. A fairly high prevalence ($\sim 45\%$) of politicized coverage across multiple sources provides initial reason to believe that such coverage could shape public support for federal agencies. Next, I conduct a survey experiment where respondents read a news article about an agency's effort to implement new rules or directives. In the article, I randomly present an agency of a particular ideological orientation—either moderate or ideologically-driven (left- or right-leaning)—and then vary whether the agency's efforts are driven by a political appointee sympathetic to the president's policy priorities (politicized agency head) or an appointee that is faithful to their agency's mission (principled agency head). The results show a drop in support for the agencies' actions, but only among Democrats. Republicans and independents, on the other hand, show surprising resilience to politicized messages. Furthermore, agency ideology plays only a minimal role in moderating the effect of politicization.

This paper contributes to our understanding of public opinion toward federal agencies in two ways. First, I identify a new dimension of bureaucratic reputation with the potential to shape public support for federal agencies and their policies—that is, the public's beliefs about the political motivations of agencies. The effects of politicization on support for democratic institutions is well established in other fields (e.g., judicial politics), but I go a step further in arguing and demonstrating that politicization is also an important determinant of support for agencies of the federal government (though again the effect is limited to Democrats). Second,

I uncover a mechanism through which the public may come to view federal agencies as mere political actors, which is through media coverage of federal agencies and their appointees. Understanding the formation of bureaucratic reputation from the public's perspective is an important and blooming area of inquiry in the public administration and public opinion literatures, and my finding that media plays a (limited) role in the shaping public perceptions of agencies' political motivations suggests that other dimensions of reputation may also be cultivated through this mechanism.

Reputation and Attitudes Towards Federal Agencies

How the public feels toward, and interacts with, agencies of the federal government will be shaped in large part by the reputation of those agencies in the eyes of the public. Perhaps the most widely used definition of bureaucratic reputation comes from Carpenter and Krause (2012, 26) who say that reputation is “a set of beliefs about an organization's capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences.” Reputation is often thought to consist of four dimensions including: *performative reputation*, or beliefs about an agency's ability to perform its essential duties; *moral reputation*, or beliefs about an agency's adherence to principles of right and wrong; *procedural reputation*, or beliefs about an agency's tendency to follow established processes; and *technical reputation*, or beliefs about an agency's ability to operate in technically sophisticated policy environments (Carpenter and Krause 2012).

The importance of reputation lies in its ability to provide agencies with the leverage and resources they need to face the challenges of implementing public policy. Reputation allows agencies to pursue “bureaucratic autonomy” (Carpenter 2001), or the ability to work toward an agency's mission with minimal interference from outside actors such as the legislative and judicial branches. Reputation can also help agencies to sustain their power and prestige in the face of criticism over an agency's actions and missteps. Carpenter (2014), for instance, describes how the accumulated reputational power of the FDA allows the agency to navigate the treacherous waters of regulating potentially dangerous pharmaceuticals. The fact that

agencies act strategically to protect their reputation (Maor, Gilad, and Bloom 2013; Maor 2020)—for example, selectively seeking public input on tasks that are more likely to fail (Moffitt 2010) or emphasizing descriptive representation in the agency (Wright, Mummolo, and Marr 2022)—speaks to the power of reputation as a tool for federal agencies. Those agencies that wish to be successful in their mission of implementing public policy, and that wish to exercise their authority with greater discretion, must be conscious of their reputation in the eyes of their multiple audiences.

Recently, scholars have become particularly interested in examining agency reputation from the perspective of a particular audience: the mass public. Lee and Van Ryzin (2020), for example, showed that the public does not hold all agencies with equal regard, rating agencies such as NASA more favorably than agencies such as the IRS. Furthermore, the public’s evaluations of federal agencies are shaped by individual-level factors such as ideology, trust in government, sex, and race (Lee and Van Ryzin 2020). Others have sought to understand the impact of salient symbols associated with an agency on public support for that agency and their policies. For instance, Alon-Barkat (2020) shows that symbols such as agency logos and celebrity endorsements can increase citizen trust of an agency. Teodoro and An (2018) show that individuals are more supportive of policy implementation when performed by a specific agency (e.g., Department of Energy, EPA, USACE) as opposed to the generic “federal government.” And finally, Marvel (2016) shows that exposure to a USPS television commercial containing salient symbols associated with the agency increased public evaluations of the agency’s performance. These studies suggest that bureaucratic reputation from the public’s perspective plays a key role in shaping the public’s interactions with, and attitudes toward, federal agencies and their policies.

Public Opinion and the Politicization of Federal Agencies

While previous research demonstrates the development of a favorable reputation can help agencies to gain the public’s support for their policies and mission, a particular facet of agency reputation that has yet to be examined is the public’s beliefs about agencies’

political motivations. Surely it is Congress that drafts and pass legislation, but through their responsibility for implementing said legislation, scholars have long noted (e.g., Long 1952) that federal agencies play a role in shaping public policy, and thus at times may appear as political actors. Presidents also implicitly recognize the political power of federal agencies when they intentionally install agency heads that are more favorable toward their policy goals (Moynihan and Roberts 2010), such as President Trump’s selection of former coal lobbyist Andrew Wheeler as head of the Environmental Protection Agency (Schwartz 2018). When the public observes an agency acting as though it is pursuing political ends, how might this shape public support for that agency’s initiatives or broader mission?

I argue that federal agencies that appear more motivated by politics than by their agency’s mission and principles will receive less specific and diffuse support from the public. In doing so, I focus a particular channel through which public attitudes toward agencies may be shaped, which is media coverage. I provide two reasons to support my argument. The first reason is that there is growing evidence indicating that support for another major political institution, the U.S. Supreme Court, is similarly damaged when it is framed in media coverage as engaged in politics. Hitt and Searles (2018) show that ‘game frame’ coverage of Supreme Court decisions—emphasizing political battles over principled decision-making—reduces agreement with and acceptance of those decisions. Gibson and Caldeira (2009) show that exposure to television ads framing the nomination of Samuel Alito to the Court as a purely political act led to reductions in diffuse support. And Johnston and Bartels (2010) find that both diffuse and specific support for the Court is reduced when one is exposed to more “sensationalist” media sources (e.g., political talk radio and cable news) that often refute the idea that the Court is uniquely principled and apolitical compared to other institutions. If public support for perhaps the most revered institution in the American political system is reduced when that institution is portrayed as engaged in politics, we may

expect public support for federal agencies to follow a similar pattern.²

The second reason that the politicization of federal agencies may lead to a reduction in public support is that politicization has been known to damage the relationships between federal agencies and several of their key audiences. Employees of an agency, for instance, have been shown to be more likely to leave their agency, and less likely to invest in skill development, when presidents use their appointment power to steer the policy of an agency in their preferred ideological direction (Richardson 2019). This implies that politicization matters not only for an agency's ability to hire and retain workers, but may affect agency performance by discouraging employees to develop in their capacities. The politicization of an agency can also make that agency less responsiveness to requests for assistance from Congress or the public (Wood and Lewis 2017). This is especially true for Congress members that are not of the same party of the president (Lowande 2019). If politicization is capable of affecting the way that agencies interact with its key audiences, such as its employees or the representative body whose laws they're tasked with implementing, then it may also be capable of eroding the relationship between agencies and members of the mass public.

Together, these two reasons support my primary expectation that the public will be less supportive of the rules and policies of an agency (i.e., specific support), and less supportive of the broader mission of an agency (i.e., diffuse support) when it takes on a reputation as a political actor. One of the primary channels through which I expect this to occur is media coverage of federal agencies. Driven by their desire to draw and maintain viewership, news outlets may cover agencies in a way that frames agencies' actions as though they are pursuing political ends or engaged in political battles. When the public encounters this type of coverage, then, I expect there to be a resultant drop in support, particularly in comparison to news coverage the depicts agencies as acting with principle and without political bias.

²It is worthwhile to note that—in contrast to more overtly political institutions such as Congress and the Presidency, but similar to the Supreme Court—many federal agencies receive broadly favorable views from members of both political parties. For instance, agencies such as the United States Postal Service, NASA, and the National Park Service were viewed favorably by upwards of 80% of the public in 2019 (see Pew Research Center 2019).

While politicization is generally expected to reduce public support for agencies, it is also important to consider that some agencies are perceived *ex ante* as more ideologically-driven—and potentially, more political—than others. Using a survey of federal executives, Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2018) found tremendous variation in assessments of various agencies’ ideological tendencies, with some agencies rated as more liberal or left-leaning (e.g., Department of Housing and Urban Development) and other agencies rated as more conservative or right-leaning (e.g., Department of Homeland Security). To the extent that ideological predispositions reflect political motives, the public may expect agencies that typically lean left or right to pursue political goals in their normal course of business. Therefore, I expect politicized coverage to be more detrimental to public support for agencies typically seen as lacking ideological bias (i.e., politically moderate) compared to agencies seen as predisposed toward ideological ends.

Before testing the theoretic expectations presented here, it is important to show that federal agencies receive real and substantial coverage in the media, and that this coverage does sometimes portray agencies as politically-motivated actors. This exercise is vital if we wish to contextualize the real world impact of politicized coverage on agency support. Therefore, I now turn to describing my approach and findings from a content analysis of press coverage of federal agencies, before using a survey experiment to examine the effects of various types of coverage on public support for agencies.

Politicized Coverage of Federal Agencies

I characterize coverage of federal agencies by performing a content analysis using the “NexisUni” academic research database. From this database, I gathered news stories ($N = 481$) about six agencies of the federal government (EPA, HUD, USPS, USDA, DOD, DHS). These agencies were chosen because they are among the most broadly recognizable agencies of the federal government, and because they are ideologically diverse (i.e., EPA & HUD as more liberal; USPS & USDA as more moderate; and DOD & DHS as more conservative; Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2018). Coverage of these agencies was compiled from five

different sources including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and *USNews.com* with coverage ranging from January 1st, 2020 to December 31st, 2021 (two full years).³ I have chosen these specific sources because they contain a mix of web and print content that targets audiences at various geographic levels (e.g., regional newspapers like *Tampa Bay Times* and national newspaper like *NYT*).⁴ Content from these sources should provide a broadly representative image of the types of written coverage of federal agencies that individuals are likely to encounter. Additionally, examining two years of coverage, spanning across the Trump and Biden administrations, allows me to see whether coverage of agencies is sensitive to events in the broader political environment, such as the 2020 presidential campaign.

In this coverage, I am particularly interested in determining how often agencies are portrayed as strategic, political actors. Therefore, my overall objective is to code articles according to the dominant frame of the article, which can either be (1) a ‘politicized’ or so-called ‘strategic game frame,’ or (2) a ‘principled’ or ‘issue frame.’⁵ Articles applying a politicized/game frame may portray agencies or their personnel as acting with strategic personal, political, or ideological motivations, and may pay little attention to substantive policy concerns. Articles applying a principled/issue frame portray the agency as acting in accordance with the agency’s core mission, unmotivated by political or strategic concerns. Articles that focus solely on the announcement, implementation, or impact of policy, without portraying those happenings as a struggle between political actors, also fall into the principled/issue category.

To determine the dominant frame, I inspected the contents of each article (with an

³News sources with stronger partisan or ideological biases such as CNN.com and FoxNews.com, which may be more likely to frame federal agencies in a way that fits the outlets’ political agenda, were not available from the “NexisUni” database. Future research may wish to investigate if there are systematic differences in coverage across partisan outlets.

⁴An added reason for picking the *Tampa Bay Times* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* was that they endorsed different candidates in the 2020 presidential election (Biden and Trump, respectively), and its possible that these underlying political preferences influence their coverage of federal agencies. Including both sources in this analysis will allow me to characterize any differences in their coverage of federal agencies.

⁵This dichotomy comes from the work of Hitt and Searles (2018). The coding procedure used in this project is an adaptation from their work. Full details of the coding procedure can be found in Appendix D.1.

emphasis on the headline and lead) and coded several sub-indicators of politicized/game or principled/issue coverage. For instance, I coded whether an article referred to an agency or its stakeholders as ‘winners’ or ‘losers,’ which is usually indicative of politicized/game frame coverage. Indeed, references to stakeholders as winners/losers were more common when the politicized/game frame dominated the article (72.1%) compared to articles where the principled/issue frame dominated (7.1%). I also coded whether an article explicitly stated that an agency’s actions were based on legally or Constitutionally granted powers—an indicator of principled/issue frame coverage—and found that it occurred in 7.52% of coverage where the principled/issue frame dominated and only 1.86% of coverage where the politicized/game frame dominated. After coding the article for all sub-indicators, a final judgement was made as to which frame appeared to dominate in the article. Table 14 in Appendix D shows the full range of sub-indicators that were coded.

Findings from Content Analysis

So how are agencies of the federal government portrayed when they become the subject of media attention? I begin by describing the various ways in which the content of articles that apply a predominantly politicized/game frame may differ from articles that apply a principled/issue frame. This is done through an examination of a sample of article headlines and key words or phrases that typify coverage of either type. From Table 1, we see that articles applying a politicized/game frame often portray political actors such as ‘Trump,’ ‘Biden,’ or ‘Top DHS Officials’ as engaged in political battle. A June 2021 piece from the *New York Times*, for instance, describes the departure of agency personnel not as a problem for the agency’s ability to fulfill their duties, but as a political ‘headache’ for President Biden. This type of language—where federal agencies and its stakeholders engage in ‘bureaucratic battles’—is characteristic of political/game frame coverage.⁶

⁶It is important to note that not all articles that are critical of an agency are necessarily applying a politicized/game frame. For instance, an April 2021 article from the *Tampa Bay Times* argued that the EPA needed to do more to regulate ‘phosphogypsum,’ a toxic waste product that has contaminated ecosystems in Florida. Though critical of the agency’s actions up to that point, the issue is not framed as a battle between political actors.

Table 1: Characterizing Coverage Type (Politicized/Game Frame vs. Principled/Issue Frame)

Agency	Headline	Source	Date
Politicized/Game Frame			
EPA	“EPA Announces Controversial Emissions Rules”	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	08/14/2021
HUD	“Exodus of Top Experts from Trump-Era HUD is Headache for Biden”	<i>New York Times</i>	06/19/2021
USDA	“Plants pressured feds to stay open; Industry wrote draft similar to Trump’s order”	<i>USA Today</i>	09/16/2020
USPS	“‘Get used to me’: Postmaster evokes Trump style in Biden era; Louis DeJoy may be the closest thing to the former president left in the nation’s capital and there’s little President Joe Biden can do about it.”	<i>Tampa Bay Times</i>	06/07/2021
DHS	“Whistleblower: Top DHS Officials Sought to Halt Reports on Russian Election Interference”	<i>USNEWS.com</i>	09/09/2020
DOD	“Biden Faces Legal, Political Complications in Mandating Coronavirus Vaccine for Troops”	<i>USNEWS.com</i>	04/30/2021
Keywords			
bureaucratic battle; disenfranchised; dismantling; dominate; gutted; manipulated; provoking; strip away; undermining; winning			
Principled/Issue			
EPA	“Local Leaders Press EPA on Lead Water Needs”	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	06/05/2021
HUD	“HUD plan makes climate a priority in housing; ‘Climate resilience’ a factor in loans, grants ”	<i>USA Today</i>	10/08/2021
USDA	“USDA Extends School Lunch Deliveries”	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	09/02/2020
USPS	“What’s an Essential Service in a Pandemic? The Post Office”	<i>New York Times</i>	04/17/2020
DHS	‘Joy and skepticism among immigrants after judge restores DACA. Many rush to apply; Florida is home to about 25,000 DACA recipients.	<i>Tampa Bay Times</i>	12/08/2020
DOD	“U.S. Military Branches Block Access to TikTok App Amid Pentagon Warning”	<i>New York Times</i>	01/04/2020
Keywords			
America’s favorite government agency; committed; essential institution; exists to serve; experience; expertise; lawful order; respected; sincere; thanks			

Note: Keywords were randomly selected from larger list shown in Appendix D

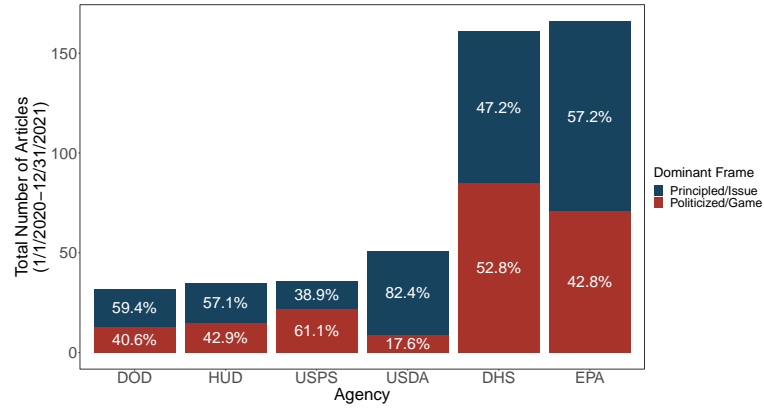
Table 1 also shows several headlines and key words or phrases from coverage the predominantly applies a principled/issue frame. Headlines such as ‘USDA Extends School Lunch Deliveries’ suggest that articles with a principled/issue frame focus more specifically on policy and its impact, and not on the strategies of political actors. In these articles, words such as ‘committed,’ ‘expertise,’ and ‘respected’ describe agencies that stand by their principles and work toward achieving their mission. These headlines and key words or phrases work well to characterize coverage that primarily applies a principled/issue frame.

Having described the type of content that is typical of politicized/game frame and principled/issue frame coverage, I now move to examining how these frames are applied across agencies and outlets. Therefore, in Figure 1 I plot the raw number of articles by agency (1a) and by source (1b), along with the percent of articles that apply principled/issue frames (blue) or politicized/game frames (red). The first thing to notice is that there is substantial variation in the amount of coverage that agencies receive, with Department of Homeland Security and the Environmental Protection Agency receiving approximately three times the coverage of agencies such as the Department of Agriculture and the United

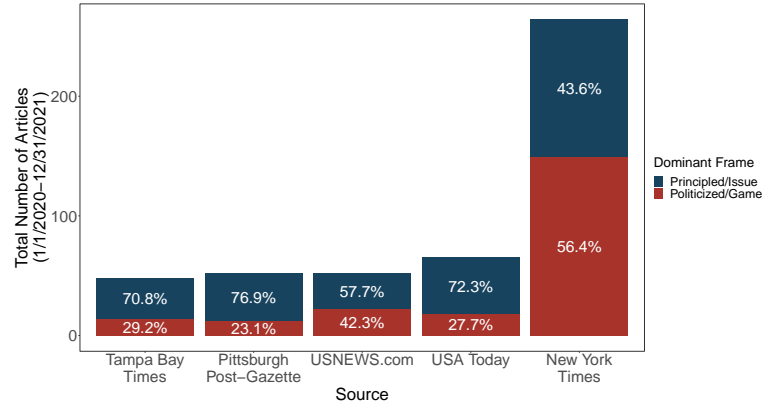
States Postal Service. Together, DHS and the EPA account for approximately two-thirds (68.0%) of all coverage. Additionally, there is clearly variation in the proportion of news coverage of these agencies that predominantly applies a politicized/game frame (as compared to a principled/issue frame). For instance, a large majority of coverage of the USDA uses a principled/issue frame (82.4%). At the same time, the USPS—which did not receive extensive coverage in the sample—was primarily portrayed using a politicized/game frame (61.1%). Most of this coverage of the USPS focused on President Trump’s efforts to control the agency (often through Postmaster General Louis DeJoy) due to its role in processing mail-in ballots in the 2020 presidential election. All agencies in the sample were observed to have been covered using a politicized/game frame, often to a substantial extent.

Turning next to Figure 1b, we see there is variation in the amount of coverage of federal agencies by source, as well as in the type of frames that these sources tend to apply. Clearly the vast majority of coverage comes from the *New York Times*, which accounts for just more than half of all coverage (54.9%). The amount of coverage across the remaining sources—*Tampa Bay Times*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *USNEWS.com*, and *USA Today*—appears in roughly equal proportions. In terms of the frames applied by these sources, coverage from the *New York Times* uses politicized/game frames more than half the time. Coverage from *USNEWS.com* provides slightly less politicized/game frame coverage in comparison (42.3%), while the remaining three sources all use politicized/game frame coverage about a quarter of the time. Across all sources, 44.7% of coverage uses predominantly politicized/game frames in stories about these six federal agencies.

With two full years of coverage, I am also able to examine how coverage of federal agencies varied across the election cycle and through the transition into the Biden administration. Figure 2 shows the cumulative number of articles over time, separated by the dominant frame of the coverage in 2a and by agency in 2b. From Figure 2a we see that there was a roughly equal balance in the number of articles applying politicized/game frames as compared to principled/issue frames from January to April of 2020, but as the election season



(a) By Agency

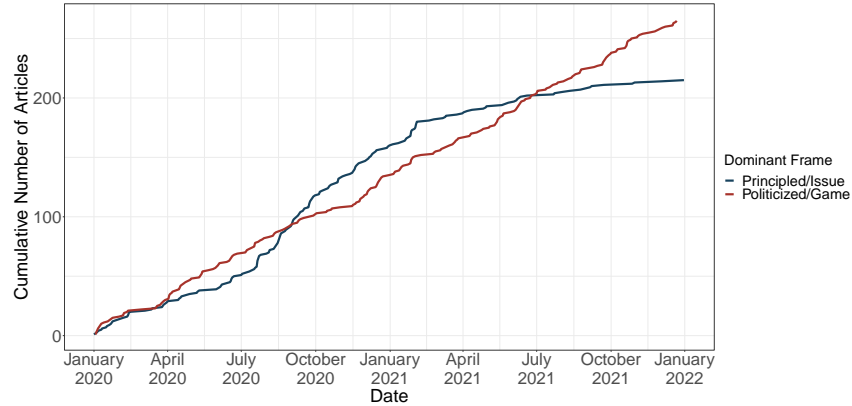


(b) By Source

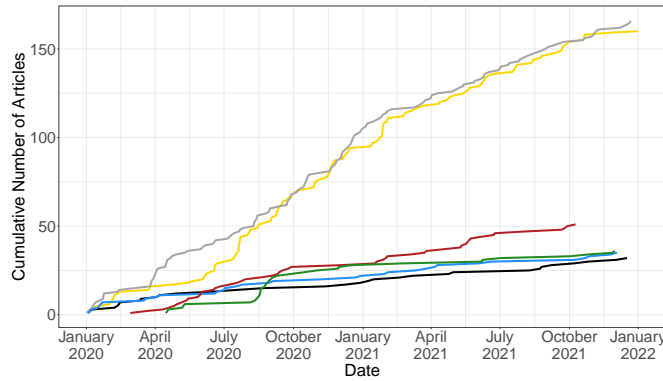
Figure 1: Number of Articles and Percent of Articles Using ‘Politicized/Game Frame’ Coverage, By Source and By Agency (January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2021)

heated up through October, the balance of coverage (regarding agencies of the incumbent Trump-administration) moved toward politicized/game frames. Following the election in November, and into July of the first year of the newly-elected Biden administration, coverage shifted toward more principled/issue frames. However, from July 2021 through the end of the year, politicized/game frame came to dominate once again. This descriptive look at the application of various frames to cover agencies of the federal government suggests that electoral cycles may play an important role in determining the balance of coverage of agencies (politicized/game frame vs. principled/issue frame) that the public is likely to encounter.

My final exercise is to examine the coverage of various agencies over time (Figure 2b).



(a) By Dominant Frame



(b) By Agency

Figure 2: Cumulative Number of Articles Over Time, By Dominant Frame and By Agency (January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2021)

As suggested earlier by Figure 1a, the majority of coverage focused on the EPA (grey) and DHS (gold). Notably, the cumulative number of articles about these two agencies tracks consistently across the series. That these two agencies dominate the coverage is also interesting considering that they are thought to be more ideologically pre-disposed (i.e., EPA as more liberal, DHS as more conservative) as compared to agencies like the United States Postal Service and the Department of Agriculture (see Figure 6). Coverage of HUD (light blue), USDA (red), USPS (green), and DOD (black) is less prevalent than coverage of DHS and EPA, but like the latter two agencies, the cumulative number of articles about the former four agencies follow roughly similar patterns through time. Also notable is the

jump in articles about the USPS around August of 2020. At this time, there was a growing concern that President Donald Trump was weaponizing the Postal Service to tip the election in his favor, prompting a number of articles to be written on the subject. The reason this pattern stands out is that, as the results of the experiment will show in the next section, Democrats are particularly susceptible to politicized coverage. The fact that articles on the politicization of the Postal Service were rising in prevalence in the run-up to the 2020 election raises question about what electoral effect, if any, this coverage may have had.

The Effect of Politicized Coverage on Public Support for Agencies

Now we have seen that federal agencies receive a non-negligible amount of press coverage, and that this coverage sometimes frames agencies' actions as based on politics, my next task is to examine the effect of this politicized coverage of federal agencies on public support for them. I do this through the use of a 2×2 factorial survey experiment, conducted in February 2022 on the Lucid survey platform ($N = 911$).⁷ The survey begins by collecting a battery of demographics and political indicators (e.g., age, ethnicity, sex, PID, ideology) before asking respondents to read a short news article that discusses an agency head's effort to implement new agency rules or directives (see Table 5, Appendix A for descriptive statistics of sample). For example, one article discusses Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas' new directive to immigration officers of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to use greater discretion in deciding whether to detain or deport undocumented immigrants. The articles used in the experiment are inspired by real news articles from legitimate sources.⁸

There are two components of each article that are randomized.⁹ First, I randomize whether the implementation strategy is framed as being led by (1) a politically-

⁷This survey experiment was pre-registered. An anonymized copy of the pre-registration form can be found [here](#).

⁸Appendix B.1 contains the full text of the articles used in the experiment and links to the real articles that inspired them.

⁹83.1% of respondents successfully identified the agency described in the article.

strategically-motivated agency head (politicized/issue frame), or by (2) a principled agency head dedicated to their agency’s mission (principled/issue frame).¹⁰ The politicized agency head is “described by experts as dedicated to the president’s policy priorities,” and is quoted as saying that their agency is “aggressively using its rulemaking authority to advance the president’s urgent [issue] agenda.”¹¹ The principled agency head, on the other hand, is “described by experts as dedicated to the mission of the [agency abbreviation],” and provides a quote that uses language from their agency’s mission statement.

The second randomization is whether the article discusses either (1) an agency with a reputation as ideologically moderate, or (2) an agency with a reputation as ideologically left- or right-leaning. Randomizing the agency being presented allows me to examine whether the effects of politicization vary with agency ideology. However, concerns may arise if I were to pick and compare only one agency of each type, as there may be idiosyncratic features of these agencies that obscure any meaningful comparison. I avoid this concern by choosing multiple agencies of each type (*moderate* vs. *left-/right-leaning*) and randomizing within each condition, with the expectation that those idiosyncrasies wash-out when comparing the two types of agencies. Table 2 shows the various agencies selected for this experiment, with the first two agencies (USPS, USDA; top half of Table 2) being considered ideologically moderate and the last four agencies (bottom half of Table 2) being considered ideologically left- (EPA, HUD) or right-leaning (DOD, DHS).¹² These agencies were selected because they are arguably equal in their salience to the public, and because they have agency heads (mostly appointed by the Biden administration) that have been publicly involved in the

¹⁰This dichotomy between politicized and principled actors is commonplace in the literature on the politicization of the U.S. Supreme Court (e.g., Hitt and Searles 2018; Woodson 2015).

¹¹This quote is adapted from the actual words of EPA Administrator Michael Regan. Link to source can be found [here](#).

¹²To create the experimental stimuli, initial judgments of agency ideology were motivated by Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2018) who generated their estimates of agency ideology through a survey of experts. To determine whether the mass public perceives agency ideology in a similar manner, respondents in this project’s pre-test and full experiment were asked to judge the ideological tendencies of eight agencies (six from Table 2 plus NASA and VA) immediately after completing the experimental outcomes. Figure 5 and 6 in Appendix A.3 show that the public does indeed perceive meaningful ideological differences between agencies, in line with the evaluations of experts.

Table 2: Summary of Experimental Materials

Agency	Agency Ideology	Agency Head	Article Topic
United States Postal Service (USPS)	Moderate	Louis DeJoy	Cost-cutting
United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)	Moderate	Tom Vilsack	Green agricultural
Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	Left-Leaning	Michael Regan	Water pollution
Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	Left-Leaning	Marcia Fudge	Evictions
Department of Defense (DOD)	Right-Leaning	Lloyd Austin	Military training
Department of Homeland Security (DHS)	Right-Leaning	Alejandro Mayorkas	Immigration

implementation of new rules and directives.¹³ Column 3 of Table 2 lists the agency heads mentioned in the articles and Column 4 lists the topics of the new rule or directive being implemented by the agency.

The outcome of interest is survey respondents’ levels of specific and diffuse support for the agency covered in the article.¹⁴ The measures of specific support are intended to capture one’s attitudes towards the agency’s short-term outputs and include (1) a measure of approval of the new rule or directive being implemented by the agency, (2) a 101-point feeling thermometer to rate the agency overall, and (3) a measure assessing the agency’s performance in general. These items are combined into a single index using principal components analysis and re-scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing greater specific support.¹⁵ The measure of diffuse support is more concerned with respondent’s beliefs that the agency has a legitimate governmental function. Here, I create a measure of diffuse support for federal agencies by adapting Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence’s (2003) measure of diffuse support for the Supreme Court. This measure is an index created from three items that ask respondents for their level of agreements with statements such as: the agency should be abolished if many people disagree with the agency’s various policies; the agency generally have a lesser role in a certain policy area; and the agency can be trusted to make decisions that are right for the country as a whole. Responses to these statements are also combined using principal components analysis and re-scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher

¹³Postmaster General Louis DeJoy was installed by an all Trump-appointed Board of Governors of the United States Postal Service.

¹⁴See Appendix A.2 for question wording of all dependent variables.

¹⁵Results of principal components analysis for the specific and diffuse support indices provided in Tables 6 and 7 of Appendix A.2, respectively.

values representing greater diffuse support.

Hypotheses

With this experimental design, I am able to test two hypothesis that match my theoretic expectations. First, I expect that—all else held constant—individuals reading about an agency that is framed as a political or strategic actor will show less specific and diffuse support toward that agency compared to individuals reading about about an agency that is framed as more dedicated to its mission and principles. And second, I expect that the negative effects of politicized frames on individuals’ specific and diffuse support for agencies will be smaller for agencies seen as pre-disposed to ideological ends (i.e., agencies seen as left- or right-leaning) compared to agencies seen as acting without ideological bias (i.e., more moderate agencies). This leads me to present Hypotheses 1 and 2 as follows:

Hypothesis 1: *Agencies that appear as politically motivated will receive less specific and diffuse support than agencies that are motivated by principled commitment to their mission*

Hypothesis 2: *The negative effect of politicization on specific and diffuse support will be smallest for left-/right-leaning agencies, and greatest for moderate agencies*

Experimental Results

I begin by testing my first hypothesis that agencies portrayed in media coverage as strategic, political actors will receive less specific and diffuse support compared to agencies portrayed as more principled actors. This is done by regressing the measures of specific and diffuse support on indicators for having read about a moderate agency (reference group is left-/right-leaning agency) and for having read an article with a politicized/game frame (reference group is an article with a principled/issue frame).¹⁶ The results are given in Table 3. Here we see that the coefficient on politicized/game frame is in the expected direction (negative) for both outcomes, suggesting that agencies receive less specific and diffuse support when

¹⁶The pre-analysis plan stated that I would include partisanship and ideology as co-variables to increase precision. The statistical and substantive interpretations of either hypothesis do not change when these co-variables are included (see Tables 8 and 9 in Appendix C).

Table 3: Effects of Agency Ideology and Article Frame on Agency Support

	Specific Support	Diffuse Support
Moderate Agency	0.011 (0.013)	-0.013 (0.014)
Politicized/Game Frame	-0.014 (0.013)	-0.013 (0.014)
Constant	0.613*** (0.012)	0.518*** (0.012)
Observations	911	911

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; one-tailed tests
Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency
Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue Frame
Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing stronger support

they have been portrayed as strategic political actors. However, neither of these estimates reach statistical significance. From this initial analysis, Hypothesis 1 surprisingly receives little to no support.

A possible explanation for the lack of support for Hypothesis 1 is that partisanship is driving individuals to respond to politicized frames in heterogeneous ways, obscuring my ability to detect a significant effect of politicized frames in the aggregate.¹⁷ It may be that Republicans are less supportive of federal agencies in general, regardless of the agency’s motivation for pursuing new rules or directives. The nature of the experimental stimuli may also account for these partisan differences, as all articles except for one (i.e., USPS) are about the actions of an agency head appointed by the Biden administration. This design choice was made to preserve the experiment’s external validity.¹⁸

¹⁷It is important to note that this exploratory analysis regarding the moderating effect of partisanship was not specified in the pre-analysis plan.

¹⁸It would be unrealistic to ask respondents to read about and judge hypothetical agencies or agency heads, and may not allow me to generalize the results to actual agencies of the federal government.

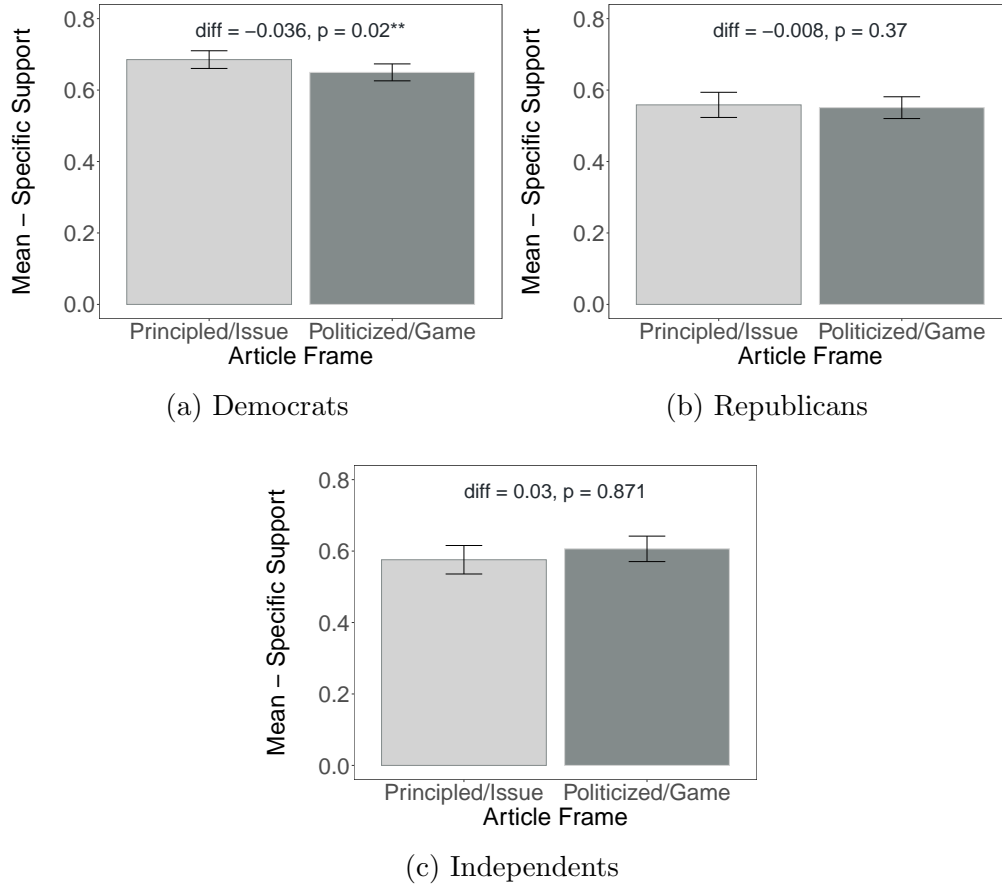


Figure 3: Mean Specific Support by Partisanship and Article Frame, with 95% CIs

Note: Estimate and p-value (one-tailed) presented above bars are from t-tests of the mean difference in specific support between those reading article with a ‘politicized/game’ frame (right bar) and those reading articles with a ‘principled/issue’ frame (left bar). Leaners included as partisans.

I explore a potential moderating effect of partisanship by regressing the measures of specific and diffuse support on an interaction between an indicator for the type of frame a respondent saw in the article and the respondent’s partisanship (treated as categorical with leaners as partisans). The results shown in Table 10 of Appendix C suggest that the only potential instances of moderation relate to specific support, with the negative effect of politicized coverage on specific support being significantly larger for Democrats as compared to independents (Column 1; $\Delta = -0.064$, $p < 0.05$). When we compare the difference in the effect size between Democrats and Republicans (Column 2; $\Delta = -0.036$, $p = 0.17$), we see that the relationship is in the expected direction (reduction in specific support larger among Democrats), but it falls short of statistical significance. These partisans differences in specific

Table 4: Interactive Effects of Agency Ideology and Article Frame on Agency Support

	Specific Support	Diffuse Support
Moderate Agency	0.001 (0.019)	-0.017 (0.020)
Politicized/Game Frame	-0.023 (0.019)	-0.017 (0.020)
Moderate Agency \times Politicized/Game Frame	0.017 (0.026)	0.007 (0.028)
Constant	0.617*** (0.014)	0.520*** (0.014)
Observations	911	911

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; one-tailed tests

Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency

Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue Frame

Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing stronger support

support are also visualized in Figure 3, once again emphasizing that politicized/game frame coverage only had a meaningful effect on the specific support of Democrats ($\Delta = 0.036$ or 3.6%; $p < 0.02$). In no instances do I find a moderating effect of partisanship on diffuse support. Overall, these results provide some support for Hypothesis 1 among Democrats, though I am hesitant to draw firm conclusions given the weak statistical evidence.

My next task is to evaluate Hypothesis 2 that the effect of politicized/game frames should be greatest for moderate agencies. This hypothesis is tested by regressing the measures of specific and diffuse support on an interaction between an indicator for having read an article about a moderate agency and an indicator for having read an article with a politicized/game frame, with the expectation that the interaction term will be negative and significant. The results are presented in Table 4 and show no support for this hypothesis. The interactive term is incorrectly signed (positive) for both outcomes and does not reach

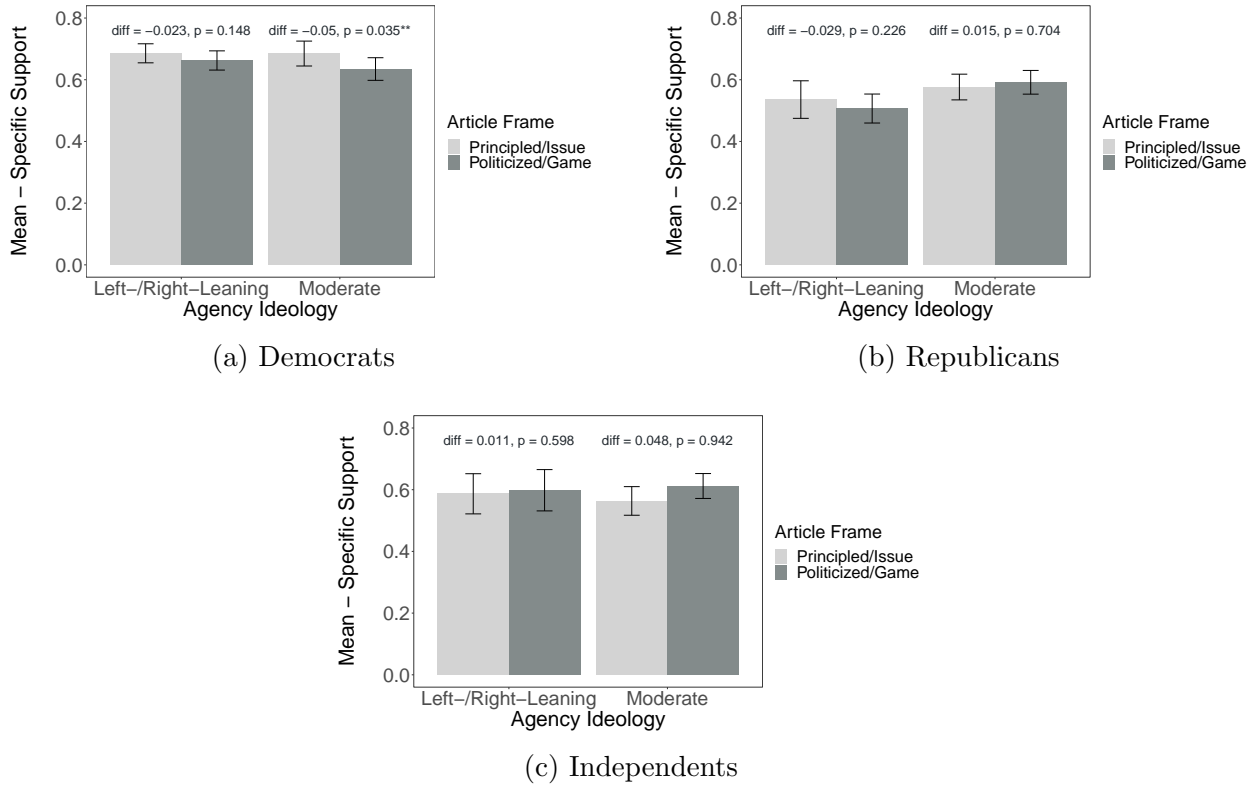


Figure 4: Mean Specific Support by Agency Ideology and Article Frame, with 95% CIs

Note: Estimate and p-value (one-tailed) presented above bars are from t-tests of the mean difference in specific support between those reading articles with a ‘politicized/game’ frame (right bar) and those reading articles with a ‘principled/issue’ frame (left bar). Difference-in-differences are not statistically significant for any partisan sub-group (see Table 11 in Appendix C). Leaners included as partisans.

statistical significance. There is no evidence here to suggest that magnitude of the effect of politicized coverage varies meaningfully with agency ideology.

Given that politicized coverage only appeared to be harming specific support among Democrats in my tests of Hypothesis 1, it may be the case that partisanship is once again driving my results. Therefore, I specify the same interactive models as shown in Table 4, but I subset the data by partisanship. The model results for Democrats (with leaners), pure independents, and Republicans (with leaners) are shown in Table 11 of Appendix C. However, the model results reveal that, even among partisan subgroups, there is little to no support for my expectation that the negative effect of politicized coverage on agency support should be greatest for moderate agencies. Patterns of specific support among Democrats follow the general pattern that I expected, with politicized frames producing a drop in support

for left-/right-leaning agencies (-0.023 or 2.3%, $p = 0.148$) and a slightly larger, as well as statistically significant, drop in support for moderate agencies (-0.05 or 5.0%; $p < 0.05$). This pattern can be seen clearly in Figure 4a, which shows the Democrats' mean level of specific support by article frame and agency type (Republicans and independents shown in Figures 4b and 4c, respectively). However, a test of the interaction between article frame and agency ideology among Democrats as shown in Table 11 (Column 1) is insignificant, suggesting that there is little difference in the effect of politicization between the two types of agencies for Democrats.¹⁹ I conclude that Hypothesis 2 is unsupported in this analysis.

Discussion

Through a content analysis of news coverage of six federal agencies from five unique media sources, I found that a substantial portion of such coverage applies politicized/game frames when describing agencies and their actions. I also found substantial variation in the balance of coverage (principled/game frame vs politicized/issue frame) across agencies and across media sources. However, the results of a survey experiment that examines how these various types of coverage influences public support for federal agencies found little effect. The only loss in support due to politicized coverage came from those identifying as Democrats. There was also some suggestive evidence that Democrats reacted more strongly to politicized coverage of more ideologically moderate agencies (e.g., USDA, USPS), but a lack of statistical significance keeps me from drawing firm conclusions.

In many ways, these results are surprising. Findings in the judicial politics have shown a clear negative effect of politicization on various forms of support for the U.S. Supreme Court, but such an effect was largely absent in response to the politicization of federal agencies. One possible explanation for these mostly null results is the nature of the experimental stimuli. Nearly all articles in the experiment discussed actions taken by an appointee of the Biden administration, making it unclear how Republicans might have responded if they had

¹⁹A test of a triple interaction (Table 12 in Appendix C between the article frame, agency ideology, and partisanship does indicate that the difference in the effect of politicization across the two agency types is significantly different for Democrats compared to all other respondents (i.e., Republicans and Independents.)

read articles primarily about actions being taken by an appointee of a co-partisan president. Another possibility is that the reaction to politicized coverage may have been stronger if politicization entailed directing the agency to perform actions outside of its authority or in direct conflict with the agency's core mission. Even the articles that used a politicized frame in the experiment did not indicate that the president was directing the agency to perform actions outside the scope of their responsibilities, it only suggested that their motivation was to fulfill their own political and strategic goals which may have constrained the amount of public support that could be lost. A final possibility is that the public simply cares little about the motivations an agency provides for its actions. As Carpenter and Krause (2012) note, bureaucratic reputation is multi-faceted and constantly evolving, so a small shift in one aspect of reputation (i.e., political/ideological motivations) may have little effect on overall agency support. Future research would benefit from empirical designs that help to uncover the mechanism at play.

Conclusion

The belief that governments receive their powers from the consent of the governed is a cornerstone of representative democracy. For agencies of the U.S. federal government, this consent—in the form of cooperation and support from members of the public—is not guaranteed. Instead, the extent to which the public provides their cooperation and support depends, to some extent, upon agency reputation. This project has questioned whether agencies that take on a reputation as politically motivated experience a loss in both specific and diffuse support from the public. By looking to findings in the judicial politics literature (e.g., Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Hitt and Searles 2018), I theorized that such a loss in support from the public should occur when agencies appear to pursue political goals.

In my empirical analysis, I explored one particular medium through which federal agencies may be portrayed as political or strategic actors, which is through media coverage of their actions. A primary contributions of this work, then, is to characterize the type and amount of coverage received by agencies of the federal government. Through a content

analysis of mainstream press sources, I revealed that coverage of federal agencies portrays them as political or strategic actors a near majority of the time. Surprisingly, however, a survey experiment revealed that politicized coverage of federal agencies only harms specific support—or support for the short term outputs of agencies—among those that identify as Democrats.

The findings presented in this paper are revealing in their own right, but much remains to be done to fully understand how the politicization of agency reputation shapes interactions with their multiple audiences. For instance, there is more to be said on when and why agency heads may choose to obscure or reveal their political motivations to the mass public. If agency support is largely robust to politicized coverage as my survey experiment seems to suggest, agency heads may have little regard for how their actions are portrayed. Additionally, the analysis of media coverage of federal agencies from various sources was admittedly limited in scope, and did not include coverage from outlets with more overt partisan connections (e.g., CNN and Fox News). These outlets—compared to the national and local print and web sources analyzed in this paper—may provide an even larger proportion of coverage of federal agencies using politicized/game frames, though this work is left for future research.

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Public Opinion and the Politicization of Federal Agencies

Online Appendix

Table of Contents

A Survey Information	2
A.1 Demographics	2
A.2 Dependent Variables	2
A.3 Agency Ideology Rating	4
B Experimental Materials	6
B.1 Treatment Articles	6
B.1.1 Moderate Agencies	6
B.1.2 Left-/Right-Leaning Agencies	7
C Supplemental Experimental Analyses	9
D Content Analysis	14
D.1 Procedure	14
D.2 Coding Categories and Criteria	15

Appendix A Survey Information

A.1 Demographics

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Lucid Sample

Variable	Lucid Sample ($N = 911$)*	US Population [†]
Median Age	44	38.5
Female	48.2%	50.8%
Education (>High school)	92.2%%	88.0%
Party ID		
Democrat (incl. leaners)	45.0%	44%
Pure Independent	16.9%	11%
Republican (incl. leaners)	38.1%	45%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	72.4%	76.3%
Black	11.6%	13.4%
Latino/Hispanic ^{††}	6.1%	18.5%
Asian	4.8%	5.9%

* N represents the number of unique respondents in the sample.

[†]US population estimates for age, sex, education and race/ethnicity come from the US Census Bureau’s “QuickFacts” (2022), and partisanship from Gallup (2022).

^{††} US population estimate of Latino/Hispanic includes those of any race, so are also included in other applicable categories. Same is not true of Lucid sample.

A.2 Dependent Variables

There are two primary dependent variables in this paper’s analyses: (1) specific support and (2) diffuse support for the federal agency shown in the experimental stimuli. The measure of specific support is created from three separate items, all of which are combined with principal components analysis (PCA). The first item gauges respondents’ level of agreement with the rule or directive described in the article by asking:

- Overall, do you agree or disagree with the [agency abbrev.]’s [plan] as described in

article?

The agency abbreviation and the text description of the rule or directive found in the article were piped in to the above question. The second item gauges respondents’ assessments of the agency’s performance by asking:

- How well do you think the [agency abbrev.] does its main job in government? Would you say it does a great job, a pretty good job, a not very good job, or a poor job?

Finally, I gauge respondents’ general levels of affect or confidence in the agency through the use of a feeling thermometer. The question wording is as follows:

- Next, I would like to get your feelings toward the [agency abbrev.] using something we call a feeling thermometer. You can use any number between 0 and 100 to express your feelings. Ratings above 50 degrees mean that you are favorable and warm toward the agency, while those below 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favorable toward the agency. You would rate the agency at the 50 degree mark if you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward it.

Table 6 shows the loadings of these three items on the first three components. We see that all three items load on the first component in roughly equal magnitudes and in the same direction. The first component accounts for 70.4% of the variance.

Table 6: PCA - Specific Support (All Items)

	PC1	PC2	PC3
Main Job	-0.60	0.37	0.70
Agree w/ Policy	-0.52	-0.85	0.01
Agency Therm.	-0.60	0.36	-0.71

My measure of diffuse support (also called “institutional loyalty” or “legitimacy”) is adapted from the work of Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence (2003), who were interested in measuring diffuse support for the U.S. Supreme Court. Their measure asks respondents to

provide their level of agreement with several statements about the Supreme Court. I have adapted these statements to focus on institutional loyalty toward federal agencies. The full text of the three institutional loyalty statements that I include in the survey are given here:

- Item 1: If the [agency abbrev.] start setting policy guidelines that most people disagree with, it might be better to do away with the [agency abbrev.] altogether.
- Item 2: The right of the [agency abbrev.] to implement certain types of controversial policies should be reduced
- Item 3: The [agency abbrev.] can usually be trusted to implement policies that are right for the country as a whole

Table 7 shows the loadings of the three diffuse support items on the first three principal components. We see that all items load in the same direction on the first component, and while the first and second items load in roughly equal magnitudes, the third items has a slightly smaller loading. Together these three items accounts for 52.3% of the variance.

Table 7: PCA - Diffuse Support (All Items)

	PC1	PC2	PC3
Do away with agency	0.67	-0.21	-0.71
Reduce right to implement policy	0.67	-0.24	0.70
Trust to implement policy	0.32	0.95	0.02

A.3 Agency Ideology Rating

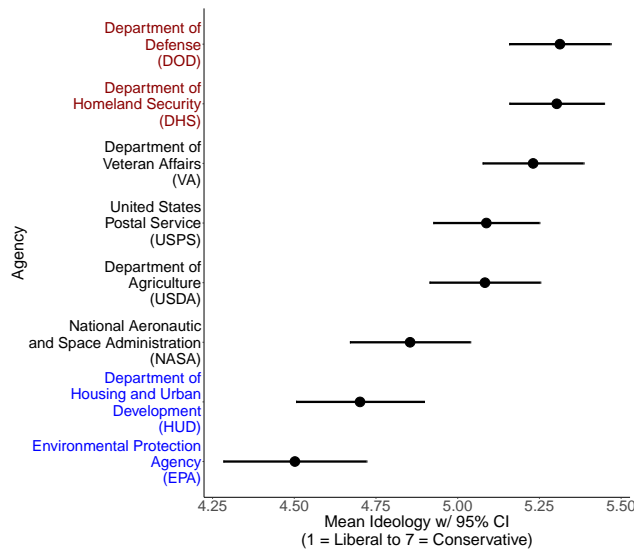


Figure 5: Agency Ideology Ratings: MTurk Pre-test

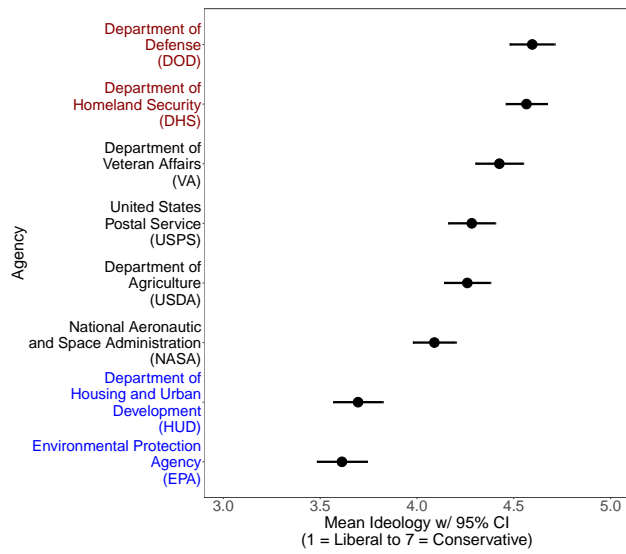


Figure 6: Agency Ideology Ratings: Lucid Experiment

Appendix B Experimental Materials

B.1 Treatment Articles

The articles used in the experiment are provided below, with articles about ‘Moderate Agencies’ shown in Section B.1.1 and articles about ‘Left-/Right-Leaning Agencies’ in Section B.1.2. The text in **red** indicates the *politicized* condition whereas the text in **blue** indicates the *non-politicized* condition.

B.1.1 Moderate Agencies

- United States Postal Service (USPS) [Link](#)

Citing [the former president’s policy agenda/the agency’s mission to provide affordable mail service], USPS Postmaster General announces plan to pursue new cost-cutting measures

The United States Postal Services (USPS) says that mail deliveries could be delayed by a day or more under new cost-cutting efforts announced this week. The decision was led by Postmaster General Louis DeJoy who was appointed during the Trump administration and who has thus far been described by experts as dedicated to [the former president’s policy priorities/the mission of the USPS].

USPS officials, bracing for steep losses from the nationwide shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have warned they will run out of money by the end of September without help from Congress. The service reported a \$4.5 billion loss for the quarter ending in March 2020, before the full effects of the shutdown sank in.

In a statement to the Associated Press, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy noted that the USPS, “is aggressively using its rule-making authority to advance the former president’s urgent cost-cutting agenda/is committed to its mission of providing the nation with reliable, affordable, and universal mail service.”

The proposed plan eliminates overtime for hundreds of thousands of postal workers and says employees must adopt a “different mindset” to ensure the Postal Service’s survival during the coronavirus pandemic. And though the plan “is not yet finalized, it will certainly include new and creative ways for us to fulfill our mission, and we will focus immediately on efficiency and items that we can control,” said spokesperson Dave Partenheimer.

- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) [Link](#)

Citing [the president’s policy agenda/the agency’s mission to support sustainable agriculture], USDA Secretary announces plans for large-scale climate projects

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced plans to finance a series of large-scale projects aimed at developing markets for climate-smart farming and forestry practices. The decision was led by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, a Biden administration appointee who has thus far been described by experts as dedicated to [the president’s policy priorities/the mission of the USDA].

USDA officials noted that these new markets would include sustainability supply chain initiatives and commitments from companies to reduce emissions within their own supply chains and production facilities. Officials added that opportunities also include markets for low-carbon biofuels and renewable energy.

In a statement to the Associated Press, Secretary Tom Vilsack noted that the USDA, “[is aggressively using its rulemaking authority to advance the president’s urgent agricultural agenda](#)/[is committed to its mission of promoting agricultural production and economic opportunity](#).”

The proposed plan cites the USDA’s Commodity Credit Corp. (CCC) as the source of its spending authority. A spokesperson for the department said recently that the department is working to figure out how early adopters of climate-friendly practices can be included in the program.

B.1.2 Left-/Right-Leaning Agencies

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [Link](#)

Citing [[the president’s policy agenda](#)/[the agency’s mission to protect the environment](#)], EPA Administrator announces plan to restore state and tribal power to protect waterways

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) plans to restore a rule that grants states and Native American tribes authority to block pipelines and other energy projects that can pollute rivers, streams, and other waterways. The decision was led by EPA Administrator Michael Regan, a Biden administration appointee who has thus far been described by experts as dedicated to [[the president’s policy priorities](#)/[the mission of the EPA](#)].

A provision of the Clean Water Act gives states and tribes power to block federal projects that could harm lakes, streams, rivers, and wetlands within their borders. Washington state blocked construction of a coal export terminal in 2017, saying there were too many major harmful effects including air pollution, rail safety, and vehicle traffic, while New York regulators stopped a natural gas pipeline, saying it failed to meet standards to protect streams, wetlands, and other water resources.

In a statement to the Associated Press, EPA Administrator Michael Regan vowed to work diligently to protect clean water, adding that the EPA, “[is aggressively using its rulemaking authority to advance the president’s urgent climate agenda](#)/[is committed to protecting human health and the environment](#).”

The EPA’s decision calls for restoration of the Section 401 provision, under which a federal agency may not issue a license or permit to conduct any activity that may result in any discharge into navigable water unless the affected state or tribe certifies that the discharge is in compliance with the Clean Water Act and state law, or waives certification. The revised rule is expected to take effect in roughly two months

- Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [Link](#)

Citing [[the president’s policy agenda](#)/[the agency’s mission to provide affordable housing](#)], HUD Secretary announces rule aimed at preventing evictions from public units

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is rolling out a new rule aimed at preventing evictions for tenants in public housing after the federal eviction moratorium expired in August. The decision was led by Department Secretary Marcia Fudge, a Biden administration appointee who has thus far been described by experts as dedicated to [[the president’s policy priorities](#)/[the mission of HUD](#)].

The rule will prohibit individuals living in housing subsidized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development from being evicted from their homes for not paying rent unless the tenants are given a 30-day notice and information regarding federal emergency rental assistance that may be available.

In a statement to the Associated Press, Secretary Marcia Fudge noted that HUD, “[is aggressively using its rulemaking authority to advance the president’s urgent housing and urban development agenda](#)/[is committed to its mission of creating sustainable and quality affordable homes for all](#).”

The new rule comes after the expiration of a federal eviction moratorium left millions of Americans at risk of being pushed out of their homes amid the pandemic. A spokesperson for the department said recently that while rules are typically enacted 30 days after they are registered, authorities will likely implement the regulation right away.

- Department of Defense (DOD) [Link](#)

Citing [the president's policy agenda/the agency's mission to protect national security], DOD Secretary announces plans for air operations, ground exercises in Australia

The Department of Defense (DOD) announced plans for further air defense cooperation measures with Australia and for an increase to the number of troops stationed in the area. The decision was led Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, a Biden administration appointee who has thus far been described by experts as dedicated to [the president's policy priorities/the mission of the DOD].

The announcement follows recent indications that the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Pacific ally would begin sharing nuclear submarine technology in the face of a growing threat from China. In November, the United States and Australia also formalized an agreement to cooperate on the development of long-range prototype bombers and hypersonic weapons.

In a statement to the Associated Press, Secretary Lloyd Austin noted that the DOD, “is aggressively using its rulemaking authority to advance the president's urgent national defense agenda/is committed to its mission of deterring war and ensuring our nation's security.”

The DOD's plans specifically emphasize the United States' commitment to Australia, and calls for increased military exercises, training, and sharing of defense technology. The plans are set to initiate within the next several months, but in the meantime a spokesperson for the department says that the department will continue monitoring potential adversaries and remains prepared to address any near-term challenges.

- Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [Link](#)

Citing [the president's policy agenda/the agency's mission to secure the country], DHS Secretary issues new arrest and deportation guidelines to immigration services

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued broad new directives to immigration officers Thursday saying that the fact that someone is an undocumented immigrant “should not alone be the basis” of a decision to detain and deport them from the United States. The initiative was led by Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas who has thus far been described by experts as dedicated to [the president's policy priorities/the mission of the DHS].

The new instructions seek to direct the department's public safety mission by training agents in the use of “prosecutorial discretion,” in which they weight the pros and cons in determining whether to detain and deport someone. Officials say that the agency simply does not have the resources to deport all undocumented immigrants it encounters.

In a statement to the Associated Press, Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas noted that the the DHS, “is aggressively using its rule-making authority to advance the president's urgent immigration agenda/is committed to its mission of ensuring a safe, secure, and prosperous Homeland.”

The DHS's directives call for immigration officers to de-prioritize arresting and deporting farmworkers and the elderly. Additionally, the directives say that agents should avoid detaining those who land on their radar because they spoke out against “unscrupulous” landlords or employers, or at public demonstrations. The directives are expected to take full effect within the next two months.

Appendix C Supplemental Experimental Analyses

Table 8: Effects of Agency Ideology and Article Frame on Agency Support, with Co-variates

	Specific Support	Diffuse Support
Moderate Agency	0.016* (0.013)	−0.010 (0.014)
Politicized/Game Frame	−0.014 (0.013)	−0.013 (0.014)
Partisanship	0.011*** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)
Ideology	−0.023*** (0.005)	−0.010** (0.005)
Constant	0.657*** (0.032)	0.524*** (0.035)
Observations	911	911

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; one-tailed tests

Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency

Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue
Frame

Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values
representing stronger support

Table 9: Interactive Effects of Agency Ideology and Article Frame on Agency Support, with Co-variates

	Specific Support	Diffuse Support
Moderate Agency	0.010 (0.018)	−0.012 (0.020)
Politicized/Game Frame	−0.021 (0.018)	−0.016 (0.020)
Moderate Agency \times Politicized/Game Frame	0.013 (0.025)	0.005 (0.028)
Partisanship	0.011*** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)
Ideology	−0.023*** (0.005)	−0.010** (0.005)
Constant	0.661*** (0.033)	0.525*** (0.036)
Observations	911	911

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; one-tailed tests

Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency

Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue Frame

Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing stronger support

Table 10: Interactive Effects of Politicization and Partisanship on Agency Support

	Specific Support		Diffuse Support	
Moderate Agency	0.017*	0.017*	−0.009	−0.009
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Politicized/Game	−0.007	0.029	−0.027	−0.012
	(0.021)	(0.031)	(0.022)	(0.033)
Democrat	0.128***	0.110***	0.057***	0.016
	(0.021)	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.028)
Independent	0.019		0.040*	
	(0.027)		(0.029)	
Republican		−0.019		−0.040*
		(0.027)		(0.029)
Politicized/Game Frame × Democrat	−0.029	−0.064**	0.025	0.010
	(0.028)	(0.036)	(0.030)	(0.039)
Politicized/Game Frame × Independent	0.036		0.015	
	(0.037)		(0.040)	
Politicized/Game Frame × Republican		−0.036		−0.015
		(0.037)		(0.040)
Constant	0.549***	0.568***	0.483***	0.523***
	(0.017)	(0.023)	(0.018)	(0.025)
Observations	911	911	911	911

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; one-tailed tests

Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency

Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue Frame

Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing stronger support

Table 11: Interactive Effects of Agency Ideology and Article Frame on Agency Support, by Partisanship

	Democrats		Independents		Republicans	
	Specific Support	Diffuse Support	Specific Support	Diffuse Support	Specific Support	Diffuse Support
Moderate Agency	−0.001 (0.026)	−0.055** (0.031)	−0.023 (0.039)	−0.014 (0.038)	0.041 (0.034)	0.040 (0.034)
Politicized/Game Frame	−0.023 (0.024)	0.001 (0.029)	0.011 (0.039)	−0.052* (0.039)	−0.029 (0.034)	−0.018 (0.034)
Moderate Agency × Politicized/Game Frame	−0.027 (0.035)	−0.005 (0.042)	0.037 (0.054)	0.071* (0.054)	0.044 (0.047)	−0.012 (0.047)
Constant	0.686*** (0.017)	0.561*** (0.021)	0.587*** (0.027)	0.526*** (0.026)	0.536*** (0.026)	0.456*** (0.026)
Observations	407	407	155	155	349	349

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; one-tailed tests

Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency

Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue Frame

Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing stronger support

Table 12: Interactive Effects of Agency Ideology, Article Frame, and Partisanship on Agency Support

	Specific Support
Moderate Agency	0.018 (0.025)
Politicized/Game	-0.023 (0.025)
Democrat	0.131*** (0.026)
Moderate Agency \times Politicized/Game Frame	0.049* (0.034)
Moderate Agency \times Democrat	-0.019 (0.037)
Politicized/Game Frame \times Democrat	0.00002 (0.036)
Moderate Agency \times Politicized/Game Frame \times Democrat	-0.076* (0.051)
Constant	0.554*** (0.018)
Observations	911

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; one-tailed tests

Reference group for Moderate Agency is Left-/Right-Leaning Agency

Reference group for Politicized/Game Frame is Principled/Issue Frame

Reference group for Democrats is non-Democrats (i.e., Republicans and Independents)

Both outcomes scaled to range between 0 and 1 with higher values representing stronger support

Appendix D Content Analysis

D.1 Procedure

Data collection for the content analysis presented in this paper was conducted using the following procedure.

1. For each agency (EPA, HUD, USDA, USPS, DHS, DOD), perform a “NexisUni” search using the following criteria:
 - Sources: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and *USNews.com*
 - Dates: Calendar Years 2020 and 2021 (01/01/2020 - 12/31/2021)
 - Search terms: Articles must include agency name and abbreviation. Abbreviation may or may not include periods. This decision was made because a visual inspection of articles that only used the agency name or only used the agency abbreviation revealed that articles of this type rarely had the agency as the central focus.
 - Example: the following phrase was used to search for articles related to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: (“Environmental Protection Agency” AND “EPA”) OR (“Environmental Protection Agency” AND “E.P.A.”)
2. From initial search results, download only those articles in which references to agency are legitimate and in which agency is main subject (see Table 13 for descriptive statistics)
 - In this content analysis, I am interested in articles that discuss the actions, findings, and happenings of federal agencies. Some of the common topics in articles that I consider to be about the “actions, findings, and happenings of federal agencies” include the release of agency studies; the appointment and dismissal of key agency actors; the announcement of new policies, rules, or procedures; changes to existing policies, rules, or procedures; lawsuits or accusations of wrongdoing; and grants, awards, or other accolades. This list is not exhaustive, but it does indicate that the primary criteria for inclusion in this analysis that the agency must be one of, if not the, main subjects of the article.
 - There were a number of articles identified in the initial search that contained search terms, but were not focused specifically on the actions or members of an agency as indicated above. For instance, an article about the opening of a new municipal recycling facility may cite an EPA statistic, but is not a story about the agency, per se. Additionally, stories about state agencies (e.g., the Ohio Department of Agriculture) were gathered in the search, but are not of interest in this analysis.

Table 13: Descriptive Statistics - NexisUni Search Results (By Outlet and Agency)

Outlet	Agency						Total
	EPA	HUD	USDA	USPS	DHS	DOD	
New York Times	120/298 (40.3%)	22/58 (37.9%)	18/58 (31.0%)	18/27 (66.7%)	70/125 (56.0%)	16/25 (64.0%)	264/591 (44.7%)
USA Today	8/24 (33.3%)	6/13 (46.2%)	7/34 (20.6%)	2/3 (66.7%)	38/49 (77.6%)	4/6 (66.7%)	65/129 (50.4%)
USNews.com	2/23 (8.7%)	1/16 (6.2%)	7/32 (21.9%)	2/2 (100.0%)	32/41 (78.0%)	8/9 (88.9%)	52/123 (42.3%)
Tampa Bay Times	20/41 (48.8%)	1/4 (25.0%)	4/17 (23.5%)	7/8 (87.5%)	13/20 (65.0%)	3/6 (50.0%)	48/96 (50.0%)
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	16/72 (22.2%)	5/15 (33.3%)	15/36 (41.7%)	7/9 (77.8%)	8/17 (47.1%)	1/4 (25.0%)	52/153 (34.0%)
Total	166/458 (36.2%)	35/106 (33.0%)	51/177 (28.8%)	36/49 (73.5%)	161/252 (63.9%)	32/50 (64.0%)	481/1092 (44.0%)

- A determination of whether a story is about an agency, or not, was made through a manual inspection of each article’s content, with a heavy emphasis placed on the headline and lead. Some articles were easily recognized as focused on an agency, such as a December 2021 piece from *USNews.com* entitled “DOD: Effect of Vaccine-Related Troop Discharges Not Yet Known,” which is clearly about the Department of Defense. However, some articles required further inspection, such as a December 2020 piece from *The New York Times* entitled, “Dear Santa: It’s Been a Hard Year,” which is actually a story about a United States Postal Service program that handles thousands of letters addressed to Santa Clause each year.
- To ensure that my article selection procedure is replicable, I asked an independent coder to perform the search procedure above for a shorter time period (January 2020), and I then compared my coding decisions to theirs. Table ?? shows that there was XX% agreement between the author and the independent coder regarding which articles are eligible for inclusion.

3. Code articles in Excel spreadsheet according to criteria given in Appendix D.2

D.2 Coding Categories and Criteria

Articles collected in the NexisUni search are hand-coded according to the following criteria. Many of the coding categories and criteria, as well as the language used to describe the categories and criteria, come directly from the work of Hitt and Searles (2018), and have been adapted for my purpose of examining coverage of federal agencies.

1. Dominant frame of the article?

- Article will be coded as 0 for ‘principled/issue frame’ or 1 for ‘strategic game frame’
- Strategic game frame
 - Include stories that frame the agency’s actions as a game, as personality contest, as strategy, or as personal relationships between political actors (e.g., president) and the agency not related to the content of the policy being implemented. Stories that focus on the strategy of bureaucrats (e.g., agency heads) or politicians, on the image of the agency or individual actors, on political power or institutional credibility as a goal in and of itself, and on public opinion related to the decision should count here.

- Principled/issue frame
 - Includes news stories that focus on issues and issue positions that emanate from the agency's actions, on real-life conditions with relevance for the agency's actions, on repercussions and policy implications of the agency's actions, and on what has happened or what someone has said and done to the extent that it deals with or is depicted as relevant to the agency's actions.
2. Mention Political Actors
 - Does the story mention the agency head, political parties, Congress, or the president?
 - Automated via R statistical software.
 3. Focus on Agency Head
 - Does the story focus primarily on the agency head and their actions, specifically?
 - 0 = No, 1 = Yes
 4. Political Views of Agency Head
 - Does the story make reference to the political values of the agency head?
 - 0 = No, 1 = Yes
 5. Politicization
 - Does the article make reference to the president attempting to control the agency for political or strategic gain, often (but not necessarily) through political appointments?
 - 0 = No, 1 = Yes
 6. Public Opinion Toward Agency
 - Does the article make reference to public opinion toward the agency?
 - 0 = No, 1 = Yes
 7. Stakeholders as Winners/Losers
 - Does the story make reference to politicians, parties, or other stakeholders winning or losing in the context of the agency's actions?
 - 0 = No, 1 = Yes
 8. Agency Strategy
 - Does the article make reference to the agency or its personnel/representatives acting in a strategic or game-like manner?
 - 0 = No, 1 = Yes

9. Agency Strategy - Motive

- Does the article provide a motive for the agency or its personnel/representatives acting in a strategic or game-like manner?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes

10. Stakeholder Strategy

- Does the article make reference to stakeholders of the agency (e.g., politicians, parties, constituents, etc.) acting in a strategic or game-like manner?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes

11. Stakeholder Strategy - Motive

- Does the article provide a motive for stakeholders of the agency acting in a strategic or game-like manner?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes

12. Law/Constitutional Authority

- Does the story claim that the agency's actions were based on law and/or Constitutionally-granted powers?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes

13. Maintaining Legitimacy

- Does the story claim that the agency or agency head acted in a way as to maintain the agency's legitimacy, credibility, reputation, or integrity?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes

14. Sports and War

- Does the story make use of language of sports and war?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes
- If Yes, words or phrases, separated by ;

15. Games and Strategy

- Does the story make use of language of games and strategy?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes
- If Yes, words or phrases, separated by ;

16. Principles

- Does the story make use of language of maintaining principles?
- 0 = No, 1 = Yes
- If Yes, words or phrases, separated by ;

Table 14: Features of ‘Politicized/Game Frame’ and ‘Principled/Issue Frame’ Coverage

Dominant Frame	About Agency Head?	Agency Head Political Views?	Politicization?	Public Opinion Toward Agency?	Stakeholders Winning/Losing?
Principled/Issue	5.64%	1.5%	0%	2.63%	7.14%
Politicized/Game	12.56%	6.05%	47.91%	3.72%	72.09%

Dominant Frame	Agency Strategy?	Agency Strategy - Motive?	Stakeholder Strategy?	Stakeholder Strategy Motive?
Principled/Issue	4.89%	2.26%	7.52%	4.89%
Politicized/Game	71.16%	62.79%	91.63%	89.3%

Dominant Frame	Legal/Constitutional?	Legitimacy/Credibility? -	About Agency Actions?
Principled/Issue	7.52%	9.4%	89.47%
Politicized/Game	1.86%	3.72%	1.4%

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