

Elite Perceptions of Agency Ideology and Workforce Skill

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Perceptions of the policy leanings of government agencies are an important component of an agency's political environment, and an agency's political environment can greatly influence how agencies formulate and implement public policy. We use a recent survey of federal executives to measure the perceptions of the ideological leanings of twice as many agencies as previously possible. Our estimates compare reassuringly to extant measures based on both expert evaluations and aggregations of the opinions of those working within agencies. We also develop a novel measure of perceptions of workforce skill. Given the prominence of the concepts of agency ideology and skill in theories of executive branch politics, the estimates we generate provide important opportunities for understanding agencies' political environments and their implications for policy making. The generation of these measures also illustrates an approach to measuring hard-to-observe characteristics that could usefully be adopted in other contexts.

Many features of administrative agencies that are relevant for understanding administrative politics such as policy leanings or competence are hard to measure and study based on observable actions. Observable behavior, such as an agency policy proposal, is a strategic reaction to the incentives faced by the agency, making it difficult to know what to infer about underlying policy views. Additionally, ideology and skill are characteristics that are more easily attributable to individuals who work in an agency rather than the agency as a whole. However, if political elites anthropomorphize agencies, ascribe these individual-level characteristics to agencies, and make decisions based on their perceptions, then these perceptions are key to understanding federal agencies and their political environments.

Rather than relying on observable characteristics or aggregating the actions and opinions of individual bureaucrats to characterize the policy leanings and competency of federal agencies, we rely on the perceptions of more than 1,500 federal executives—many of whom have worked for the federal government for more than a decade. These perceptions allow us to avoid challenges interpreting and aggregating individual actions and opinions because the executives aggregate and interpret the individual actions and opinions for us. While defining the theoretical concept of agency ideology is problematic when applied to an organization composed of hundreds or thousands of people, if everyone believes an agency is “liberal” and acts accordingly, those beliefs are important for explaining actions and outcomes. Like federal executives, mem-

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bers of Congress and their staffs work closely with agencies and likely share executives' perceptions. Indeed, scholars have used estimates of agency ideology based on expert perceptions to explain a number of aspects of administrative politics (see, e.g., Haeder and Yackee 2015; Selin 2015).

To account for variation in executives' responses due to differential work experiences or conceptions of agency ideology or skill, we analyze expert evaluations using a statistical measurement model, and we show that the perceptions we measure reflect previously observed variation in reassuring ways. Beyond characterizing the policy leanings and skillfulness of more than twice as many agencies as previously possible, beyond the virtue of being able to leverage the executives' expertise and experience to measure such hard-to-measure traits, our measures of executives' perceptions are directly relevant for analyses of how policy makers interact with federal agencies. The generation of these measures also illustrates an approach to measuring hard-to-observe characteristics that could usefully be adopted in surveys in other contexts (e.g., Federal Human Capital Survey, surveys of state officials, surveys of neighborhoods).

APPROACHES TO CHARACTERIZING HARD-TO-OBSERVE AGENCY FEATURES LIKE IDEOLOGY

Many hard-to-assess characteristics of agencies are politically relevant. Indeed, scholars have allocated significant effort to generate measures of the ideological leanings of agencies. Early efforts focused on characteristics of the agencies themselves or the presidents appointing agency heads (see, e.g., Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Gilmour and Lewis 2006), but recent work uses characteristics of bureaucrats aggregated to the agency level, including survey responses (e.g., Clinton et al. 2012; Maranto 2005; Maranto and Hult 2004), votes of commission executives (Nixon 2004), public statements of appointees (Bertelli and Grose 2011), or the political donations of federal employees (Chen and Johnson 2015).

While informative, aggregating individual-level opinions and behaviors to produce an agency-level estimate is complicated by three factors: defining an aggregation function, measuring individual-level views relevant to the agency's policy domain, and achieving a sufficient sample size. Aggregation methods assume that the policy views of an agency are a knowable function of individual behavior or opinions, but it is hard to know what this might be. Unlike a legislature that decides by majority rule (and whose decisions can therefore be summarized by the median member), it is unclear why the views and actions of the average bureaucrat would similarly define an agency's policy views. Moreover, an agency's culture and mission or the effect of shared training and work experiences may cause individuals to have similar policy views related to

their agency's policy domain, while their views on unrelated domains may vary. It is unclear whether bottom-up aggregation of a unidimensional measure of individual-level ideology yields a consistent measure of domain-specific policy views across agencies. Finally, aggregation measures require large samples of bureaucrats to generate reliable estimates.¹

Another approach relies on expert assessments (Clinton and Lewis 2008). While this approach avoids the difficulties involved with aggregating individual-level opinions and behavior, it relies on experts' knowledge. An expert who lacks direct experience with specialized agencies, such as the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, may give responses based on heuristics rather than knowledge (e.g., being more likely to rate an agency as conservative if its name includes the word "defense").

MEASURING BELIEFS ABOUT AGENCIES

Our approach taps the expertise of more than 1,500 federal executives to characterize the perceived policy leanings and skillfulness of agencies. We use the results from the 2014 Survey on the Future of Government Service (SFGS), a 15–20-minute online and paper survey of US-based federal executives. The survey targeted all political appointees, all career members of the Senior Executive Service, and other high-level career managers (e.g., SFGS, 14–15) with policy-making authority across the executive establishment. The response rate for the survey was 24% (3,551 of 14,698). (The appendix, available online, reports the full survey methodology, screen shots, model details, and estimates.) The survey instrument asked a random subsample of respondents:

Some agencies have policy views due to law, practice, culture, or tradition that can be characterized across Democratic and Republican administrations as liberal or conservative. This can be an important feature of the environment of public management in these agencies (which is why we ask about it). If you are willing, we would benefit from your assessment of the policy leanings of the following agencies to characterize this aspect of their management environment. As with other questions, you are free not to answer.

In your opinion, do the policy views of the following agencies tend to slant liberal, slant conservative, or neither consistently in both Democratic and Republican administrations? [Respondents were also provided a "Don't know" option.]

1. Clinton et al. (2012) produce estimates for 25 agencies, and Chen and Johnson (2015) generate estimates for 76 agencies. Most official government documents name between 150 and 350 agencies.

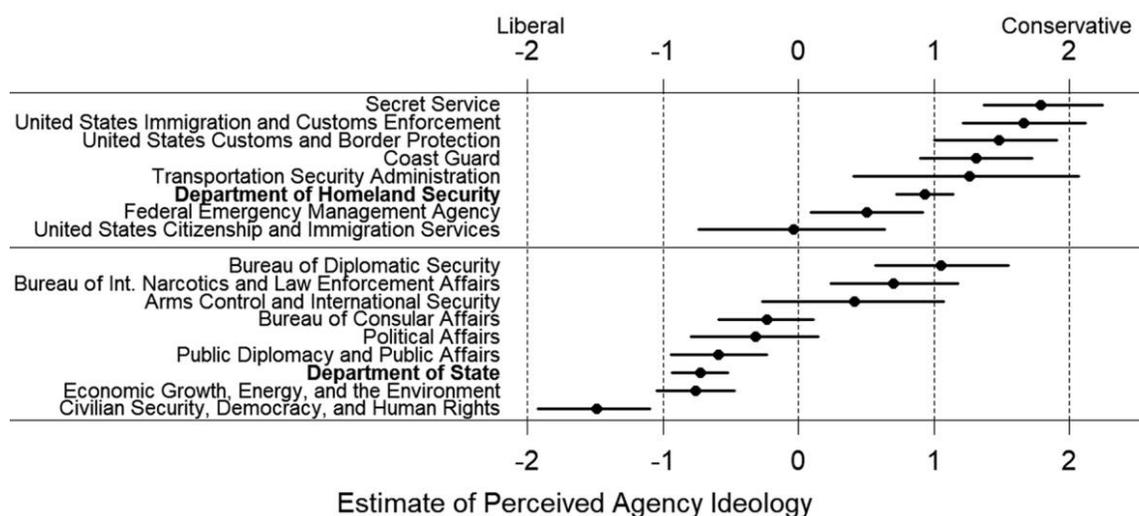


Figure 1. Intradepartment variation in perceived agency ideology. Lines denote 95% regions of highest posterior density. We postprocessed the simulation output iteration by iteration to constrain the estimates of perceived agency ideology to be distributed $N(0,1)$, and we allow the priors on perceived agency ideology to set the direction of the scale.

The question wording includes the language “across Democratic and Republican administrations,” emphasizing long-term, stable leanings.² Respondents rated agencies on a scale from 1 (“Liberal”) to 5 (“Conservative”). To anchor interpersonal comparisons, all respondents were asked to evaluate the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). In addition, the survey asked respondents to identify and characterize the three agencies they worked with the most.³ We focus on the liberal-conservative dimension of policy views because it orients political actors’ thinking about public policy in general across a wide range of issues. One virtue of the use of federal executives as experts is that federal executives are able to observe domain-specific policy views relevant for each agency and to map those views onto the executives’ conception of the general liberal-conservative ideological dimension. Policy views unrelated to the agency’s policy jurisdiction are less likely to influence our estimates than aggregations of individual-level ideology.

To compare responses across executives and agencies, we use a Bayesian multirater item response model (see the appendix). So doing allows bureaucrats to use the response scales in different ways. For example, respondents may interpret what it means to be a “liberal” agency differently, or they may

2. Respondents may characterize an agency’s policy views as neither conservative nor liberal because the agency’s policy views are not consistent across administrations or because individuals’ views on the agency’s policy domain are not correlated with ideology. See sec. 6 of the appendix for discussion.

3. Online respondents were asked to evaluate three additional randomly selected agencies, including two bureaus in the respondent’s executive department, if applicable.

use the response options differently (e.g., the meaning of the gap between 2 and 3 may differ). Moreover, we use informative priors to place greater weight on the views of respondents with direct experience working with an agency, to account for the fact that some experts are “more expert” when it comes to characterizing some agencies.

THE PERCEIVED IDEOLOGICAL LEANINGS OF FEDERAL AGENCIES

We generate estimates of perceived agency ideology for 165 agencies—the 15 executive departments, 95 agencies within the departments, 7 agencies in the Executive Office of the President, and 48 independent agencies. (We include the full set of estimates in the appendix.) Several conclusions emerge from our estimates. First, respondents perceive defense, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies to be among the most conservative, while agencies perceived to be the most liberal include those providing social welfare (Department of Health and Human Services), distributing foreign aid (US Agency for International Development), and enforcing civil rights laws (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission).

While reassuringly consistent with prior findings, our estimates reveal interesting and substantial variation within executive departments. Figure 1 plots estimates for two executive departments: Homeland Security and the State Department. While the Department of Homeland Security is perceived as more conservative than the Department of State, agencies within a department can nearly span the entire space. For example, within the State Department experts regard the Bureau of Diplomatic Security as quite conservative relative to Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. These pre-

viously hidden within-department differences must surely influence the interactions these bureaus have with departmental leadership and political principals—especially since these are differences in the perceptions of executives who work closely with these agencies.

To compare how the executives' perceptions relate to prior measures, figure 2 plots our estimates against other commonly used measures. While the scales differ across measures and we would expect differences based on the measurement difficulties discussed above, the strong correlation between executives' perceptions and measures based on the perceptions of experts outside government, civil servants' individual ideol-

ogy, and civil servants' political donations suggests that the perceptions are capturing a common conception of ideology. The fact that the upper-left plot in figure 2 shows that our estimates correlate at 0.88 with the Clinton-Lewis scores suggests that executives inside the bureaucracy have similar perceptions as outside experts. The correlation of 0.80 with the Clinton et al. (2012) scores in the upper-right plot of figure 2 and the correlation of 0.75 with the average self-reported ideology of career executives in these agencies plotted in the lower right suggest that the policy leanings of career executives contribute considerably to executives' perceptions of the ideological leanings of these agencies.

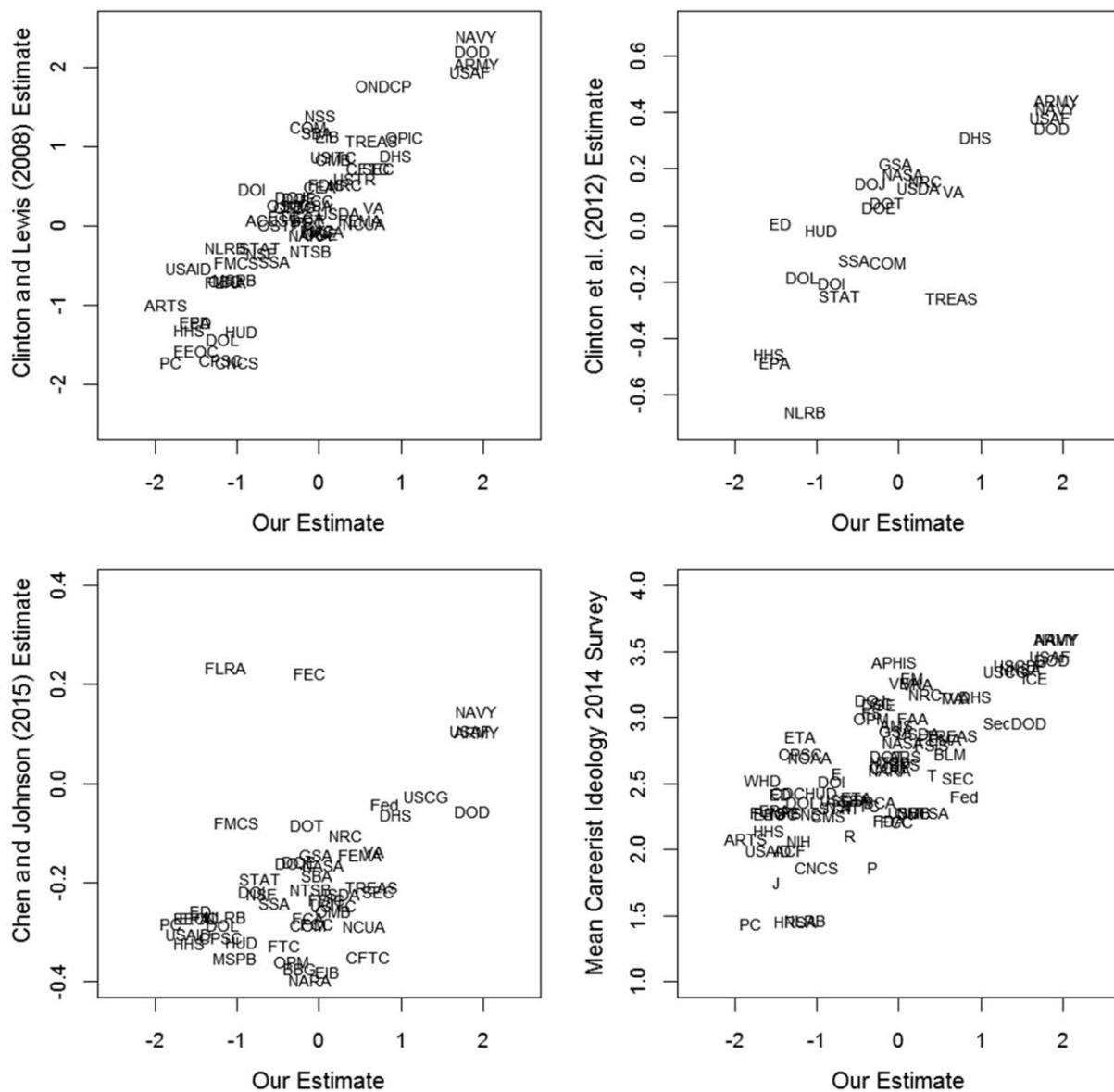


Figure 2. Comparison of estimates to other estimates of agency ideology. Clinton et al. (2012) estimates are unweighted. Chen and Johnson (2015) estimates are from the Obama administration. Agencies with at least 10 respondents are included in the plot in the lower-right quadrant. The average for the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities includes respondents working for the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, and Institute of Museum and Library Services.

The most dissimilar estimates are those based on the political donations of bureaucrats serving in the Obama administration. Our estimates only correlate at 0.48 with the donation-based ideology estimates of Chen and Johnson (2015). Whether these differences reflect the difficulty in aggregating individual responses or the difficulty of inferring ideology from political donations, important differences emerge even though there is much agreement on the relative ideology of many agencies.

THE PERCEIVED SKILLFULNESS OF AGENCIES

The perceived skillfulness and competence of an agency is another trait of common theoretical interest given the bureaucracy’s role in implementing public policy. Many theories explicitly model possible trade-offs between competency and ideological agreement (e.g., Epstein and O’Halloran 1999), but characterizing the skillfulness and competency of agencies is difficult given the lack of common tasks across agencies and the noisiness of relying on available data. Existing approaches to measuring agency competence rely on self-reports among

federal survey respondents within agencies or percentages of employees within agencies engaged in certain types of occupations (e.g., professional or technical). Self-reports, however, are not necessarily a reliable source of information about the skill of workforces, as bureaucrats may be unwilling to identify their workplace as being unskilled, and there is substantial variation in human capital both within and across occupational categories.

Relying on the perceptions of federal bureaucrats provides an alternative path forward—one that relies on the expertise of those who have the experience and knowledge to make such comparisons. To characterize the skillfulness and competency of agencies we asked a random subsample of respondents: “How skilled are the workforces of the following agencies?” (1, not at all skilled, to 5, very skilled), and we analyzed the responses using an identical statistical measurement model to generate estimates for 159 agencies (see the appendix for details).

Figure 3 plots the distribution of agency skillfulness by agency ideology (see the appendix for full set of estimates).

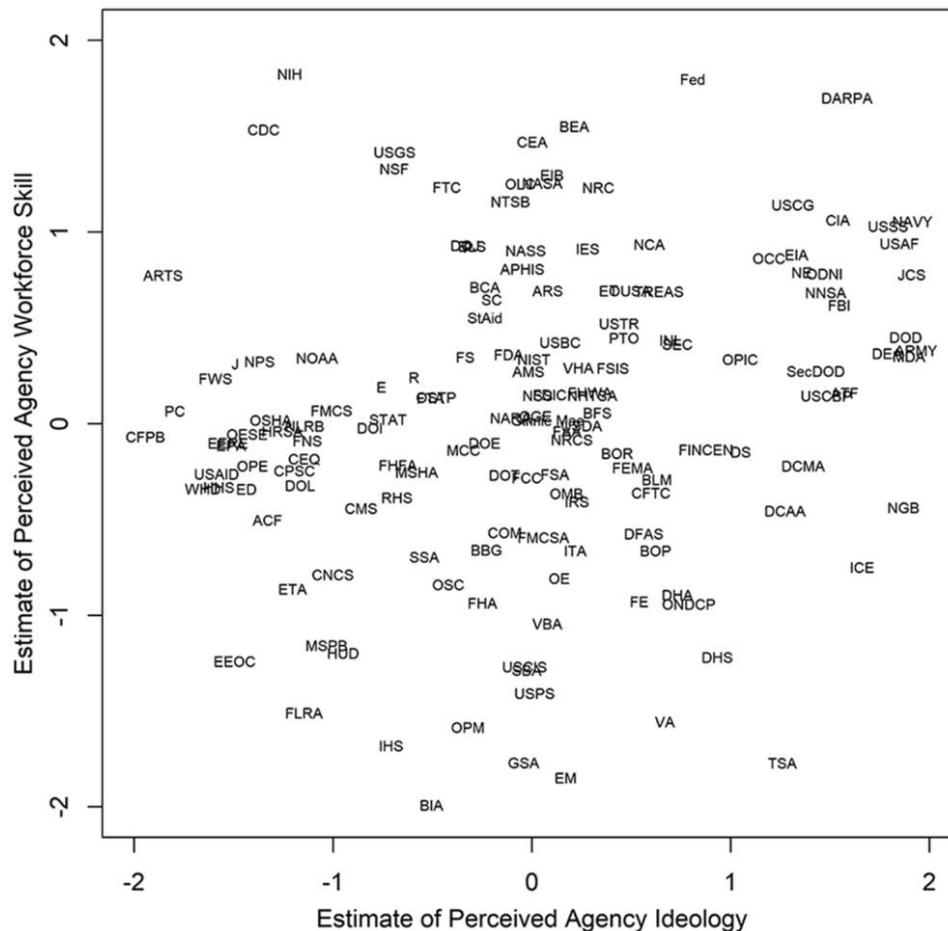


Figure 3. Perceived agency ideology and agency skillfulness. We omit the perceived skill estimates of five agencies due to imprecision: Defense Commissary Agency, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Federal Home Loan Corporation, National Credit Union Administration, and AMTRAK.

While it is obvious that the two concepts are not strongly related, the figure reveals impressive variation in both dimensions. Federal executives perceive that some of the least skilled agencies are the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Transportation Security Administration (TSA). The pattern is compelling, as few would be surprised to see employees in the Federal Reserve (Fed), Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), or National Institutes of Health (NIH) listed among the most skillful.

This variation in perceived skill and ideology is substantively important because it can shape the behavior of presidents and members of Congress toward agencies. For example, political principals are likely to find neutral competence at the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), whereas a liberal legislator may find responsive competence at the NIH while a conservative might not. Moreover, if political principals are willing to trade some ideological congruence for expertise, a conservative may support delegating policy making to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) but not the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Similarly, a liberal may support a larger budget at the Fed but not at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Overall, figure 3 reveals the ability of these estimates to gain leverage on many important research questions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Characterizing the policy leanings and competency of agencies is difficult for both conceptual and measurement reasons. Relying on federal executives' evaluations provides an alternative approach that avoids some key difficulties. Federal executives have decades of experience working with these agencies, which gives them the expertise to evaluate agencies' characteristics. While we cannot conclusively demonstrate the accuracy of these perceptions—in part because of the conceptual issues involved in defining what an agency's policy leanings are in the absence of a well-specified aggregation function—the perceptions of agency ideology that we recover are broadly consistent with existing measures. The consistency between our measure of executive perceptions and measures of agency ideology suggests that the perceptions of executives are widely held and based on the policy views of civil servants who work in the agencies. This suggests that the estimates we generate here are most appropriate for cases in which scholars wish to measure *elite* perceptions of ideology and skill. It is impossible to tell whether the estimates are appropriate measures of “true” agency ideology without a clear theory of how agency characteristics and individual beliefs aggregate.

Insofar as policy makers take actions based on their beliefs about agencies—and it is hard to imagine otherwise—characterizing those beliefs is essential for understanding actions that they take toward those agencies. Nearly every question of interest in executive politics and policy making involves policy makers' beliefs about federal agencies. Whether scholars are interested in political principals' decisions about agency staffing, the delegation of discretion over policy, or the size of agency budgets, perceptions of agency ideology and skill are relevant. The ability to measure the ideology of more agencies, including agencies within departments, and the skills of agencies' workforces provides new opportunities for research on the political environment and policy making of federal agencies.

This generic approach to measurement issues might also be useful in other contexts. Future surveys of respondents with comparable expertise could take this approach to measuring hard-to-observe organizational characteristics (e.g., Federal Human Capital Survey, Merit Principles Survey, surveys of state civil servants).

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