

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Policy Change and Civil Servants' Career Choices

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Abstract: Federal civil servants are motivated by and self-select into agencies based on the policy goals of the agency in which they serve. However, incoming presidential administrations may change the goals of the agency to accomplish their agenda. This poses a problem for civil servants, requiring them to evaluate their investment in and future with the agency, and for presidents seeking to leverage the expertise and experience of those civil servants. A growing body of literature documents that ideological misalignment between civil servants and presidents increases rates of exit. However, these studies do not measure the changes in agency policy theorized to drive higher rates of turnover. We use original data on agency goals to measure policy change across agencies and administrations. We provide preliminary evidence that goal change is associated with increased separation rates during the Trump administration, but lack sufficient precision to make claims about the relationship between goal changes and job satisfaction. We then discuss next steps, most importantly improving our use of agency goals to measure policy change.

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When President Trump assumed office, agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had among their most important goals to “reduce greenhouse gas emissions” and “strengthen environmental protections” (EPA 2016). Attached to each priority goal was a high-level goal leader, the Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Office of Air and Radiation (OAR) and the Deputy Chief Financial Officer, whose job it was to ensure the achievement of the goal and report to agency leadership and outside stakeholders on the progress towards completion. The EPA mentioned these goals specifically in their FY 2016 and 2017 budget justifications and outlined how funds would be used to reach these goals (EPA 2015; 2016).¹ For example, in FY 2017, the EPA requested over \$200 million to support “regulatory activities and partnership programs to reduce [greenhouse gas] emissions domestically and internationally” (EPA 2016, 20).

For a president skeptical of the effect of greenhouse gases on climate change and who campaigned on “get[ing] rid of [the EPA] in in almost every form” and promising to “end intrusive EPA regulations” (Washington Post 2017; Trump 2017), getting these goals changed presented an immediate challenge. Given the numerous mandates provided to the EPA and their many directives to do things like improving air quality, regulating the release of radioactive material, ensuring the quality of drinking water and safety of chemicals, preserving and restoring land and natural resources, and protecting the health of ecosystems, the agency has considerable discretion in what they will prioritize and how they will expend their limited time and resources. To get the EPA to direct their attention towards tasks more agreeable to the Trump administration and, more importantly, away from tasks the president was in direct opposition to, the agency’s goals were changed. Instead of taking on climate change, the goals of the agency were altered to focus on things like “accelerat[ing] permitting-related decisions” and “accelerat[ing] the pace of cleanups” (EPA 2018). As a result, the EPA was left with a restricted and narrow focus on issues of procedure and process. Associated with this change in goals was the removal of the \$200 million in funding mentioned above (EPA 2018). Similarly, the agency’s number of mentions of “climate change” in their budget justification decreased from 344 to 3 (one of which was to highlight the cutting of \$16 million in funding for climate change research).

Employees in the agency were faced with a dilemma. Should they stay in the agency, despite changes in its core directives, or should they leave, in protest of the changes made? Many in the agency chose the latter, with nearly 1,600 employees leaving the agency in the first 18 months of the Trump administration (Dennis, Eilperin, and Ba Tran 2018). These departures constituted a departure of over 10% of the agency’s workforce and a massive loss of the experience and expertise these employees possessed. Many that left cited the “profound policy shifts” that “were inconsistent with the reason they had joined the EPA” and that made remaining in the agency “intolerable” (Dennis, Eilperin, Ba Tran 2018; Badger, Bui, and Parlapiano 2021). As Christopher Zebra, a 38-year veteran of the EPA, put it, the “crazy glue that [held] the [EPA] together,” service to the agency’s mission, “fell apart” (Dennis, Eilperin, and Ba Tran 2018).

This example from the Trump administration raises the more general question of how do changes in agency policy associated with a new administration affect an agency employees’ career decisions? Many federal civil servants are motivated by policy and self-select into agencies based on the agency’s mission (Clinton et al. 2012). However, incoming presidential administrations often change the specific policy goals an agency pursues to be congruent with the President’s agenda (Krause 2009). These changes in policy goals may reduce the utility civil servants get from their job, requiring them to evaluate their investment in and future with the agency. Existing work on the relationship between agency politicization and civil servants’ career decisions (e.g., whether to leave the agency, whether to invest in policy expertise) implicitly assumes that civil servants’ reduced job satisfaction is due (in part) to these changes in policy goals (see e.g., Doherty, Lewis, and Limbocker 2019; Richardson 2019).

In this paper, we explicitly evaluate this mechanism using original data on policy goals from the end of the Obama administration to the beginning of the Trump administration to examine whether changes in the stated policy goals of agencies made civil servants more likely to exit their agency and less likely to be satisfied with their organization and job. We explain the goal development process and how we use it to identify policy change in federal agencies. We then analyze the relationship between the proportion of goals

¹Furthermore, in a 2017 GAO survey, nearly two thirds of managers within the EPA reported that performance information related to these goals is paid attention to by those they report to and that upper management demonstrates a strong commitment to achieving results towards the completion of their goals (GAO 2018). Additionally, in a 2016 OPM survey, nearly 85% of EPA employees agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how their work relates to their agency’s goals (OPM 2016).

changed or eliminated and separation rates and employee job satisfaction in 14 executive departments (we lack a goal change measure for the Department of Energy) and the Environmental Protection Agency. We focus on these agencies due to data limitations, which we describe below. Despite the limited number of observations, we find evidence that changes in agency goals are associated with increased separation rates during the Trump Administration. Our estimates of the relationship between goal change and job satisfaction lack sufficient precision to differentiate them from zero with a high degree of confidence. We conclude by discussing our next steps for this project, most importantly improving our measure of changes in policy goals, and preliminary observations from our analysis this far.

Theory

Policy Change and Civil Servants' Career Decisions

Theories of civil servants career decisions assume that civil servants care about policy created and implemented by their agency and career concerns such as compensation and promotion (Cameron and de Figueiredo, 2020; Gailmard and Patty, 2007). When the president and the president's appointees change the policy direction of an agency, the satisfaction that policy-motivated civil servants receive from their career is reduced if they disagree with these changes. Absent an offsetting change in other sources of job satisfaction (e.g., salary), these civil servants are more likely to exit the agency and, if they stay, have lower morale.

A growing body of empirical research confirms the core intuition of these models (Bolton et al., 2019; Doherty et al., 2016; Richardson, 2019) – that civil servants whose policy views differ from the president and the president's appointees are most likely to leave their job. These studies vary in how they measure policy disagreement, ranging from an agency-level measure based on estimates of agency ideology (Bolton et al., 2019) to self-reported ideology (Doherty et al., 2016) to differences in ideal points derived from survey responses (Richardson, 2019). These studies assume that ideological difference results in changes in policy that affects civil servants' job satisfaction, ultimately leading to changes in civil servants' career decisions. However, these studies measure policy disagreement and career decisions without measuring the intervening step of policy change. For a civil servant to leave her job, the magnitude in policy change at her agency must reduce her job satisfaction below some threshold such that her expected satisfaction from alternative employment exceeds her expected satisfaction from staying in her current job.

The magnitude of policy change after a change in administration may vary across agencies resulting in heterogeneous effects of changes in party control of the presidency on civil servants' job satisfaction and resultant career decisions. Presidents will be focused on agencies where civil servants are less likely to support the president's policy agenda (Lewis, 2008). Furthermore, some agencies will be more central to the president's policy agenda and will be more likely to experience more dramatic changes to their policies. For example, President Trump's campaign focus on immigration and border security should lead us to expect a greater level of policy change in the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice.

Additionally, we should expect that some civil servants will be more receptive to presidentially directed policy change. In particular, civil servants aligned with the president's policy views will likely welcome change to reinvigorate their agency. For example, the Department of Education's workforce will likely be happy with policy changes implemented by the Biden administration, after four years under the Trump administration. However, agencies in ideological opposition to the president will likely be dissatisfied with changes to the agency's policy, as evidenced by the case of the EPA during the Trump administration. Hypothesis 1 follows.

Hypothesis 1: Agencies that are ideologically opposed to the incoming administration and that experience greater policy change will have higher rates of civil servant exit and lower rates of employee satisfaction.

Similarly, within an administration, civil servants aligned with the policy vision of the president will be more amenable to policy change. For example, within the Obama administration, civil servants in the Department of Education likely welcomed a shift in priorities to focus on something like "increas[ing] enrollment in high-quality state preschool programs." These types of changes are an extension to what civil servants in the agency view as the agency's core mission. Hypothesis 2 follows.

Hypothesis 2: Agencies that are ideologically aligned with the incumbent president and that experience greater policy change will have lower rates of civil servant exit and higher rates of employee satisfaction.

Data

A significant challenge to better understanding heterogeneous effects of politicization on civil servants' career decisions is to develop a measure of agency policy change that is both comparable across agencies and across time. Existing work attempting to measure policy change has typically focused on agency performance of specific tasks (e.g., Wood and Waterman 1991; Bolton, Potter and Thrower 2016) rather than the overall aims of agencies themselves. However, this approach is limited by the number of policy outcomes that we can observe and compare across agencies.

Goals provide a more direct and comparable measure of policy change within an agency. Agency priority setting occurs prior to policy outcomes and is conducted in a uniform way across agencies. Further, a change in the priorities of an agency will have ramifications for how policy is pursued by the agency in the future. Given the large number of possible intentions or foci of an organization, organizational goals impose order by creating a "collective intent" that is a "guide to action" for the organization and its members (Mohr 1973). Goals will serve as the basis by which agencies make critical decisions about how they will allocate spending post-appropriations, what they will put on their limited rulemaking docket, and where to focus personnel.

Strategic Goals

In federal agencies, the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) and its predecessor (the Government Performance and Results Act [GPRA] of 1993)², statutorily require agencies to plan, evaluate, and report on the central activities of the agency. As part of the president's first budget, agencies produce a strategic plan.³ In these plans the agency is "to identify 'general goals and objectives' for the major functions and operations of the agency," defined as agency strategic goals, that they will focus on for the subsequent four fiscal years. These strategic goals remain in place until a new strategic plan is produced at the beginning of the next presidential term. For each subsequent year covered by the strategic plan, agencies are required to publish an annual performance report that details their progress towards accomplishing their strategic goals. The timeline for the development and review of strategic plans at the beginning of the Trump administration is outlined in Figure 1. This highlights the length of time that agencies spend on the development of strategic goals and the reporting of progress towards those goals, the regularity of OMB review, and the close connection of performance reporting with the budget process.

Strategic goals cover the very core of the activities, priorities, and direction of the agency. Emphasizing this point, Sonny Perdue, President Trump's Secretary of Agriculture, stated that their strategic plan "serves as a roadmap for everything the [Department of Agriculture (USDA)] family and I will do..." and "will guide the work of all of us at USDA in the coming years..." (USDA 2018). Agencies set 2-10, typically 3-5, of these goals for a period of four years. Strategic goals are further elaborated into objectives and objectives into performance goals.⁴ This elaboration takes the "what" of the agency's overarching goals and breaks it down into the "how" for tasks and benchmarks the agency will use to guide specific action and allow for the evaluation of performance (Gagné 2018).

²GPRAMA is one of a series performance management reforms over the last few decades. However, GPRAMA has stood out from its predecessors, having been shown to be more effective at getting agencies to use performance data in their decision making and having been implemented in a nonpartisan way (Kroll and Moynihan 2020).

³The process begins with agencies developing draft goals in the spring of the year prior to goals being reported (OMB Circular A-11 Section 230.13). Agencies then continue the process of revising these goals for more than 8 months (OMB Circular A-11 Section 230.13). This process runs parallel with the formation of agency budgetary requests. Most agencies include long-term goals and outline specific allocation requests for each long-term goal in their budget requests. Agencies are also required to report on their performance of achieving their previous goals in accordance with their annual budget request. Evidence of good performance is used to convince political actors that they will see a return on their investment in the agency.

⁴Strategic plans contain four types of agency goals, each a subcategory of the previous type of goal: a) strategic goals; b) objectives; c) performance goals; and d) priority goals. Objectives and performance goals provide more specific, quantifiable targets for agencies to report on the success of their more general strategic goals.

Timeline for the Development and Review of Strategic Goals

February 2017: Concurrent with the President's FY 2018 Budget, Agencies Publish FY 2016 Annual Performance Report (Reporting their Progress on their 2014-2018 Strategic Goals)

Spring 2017: Agencies Conduct Annual Strategic Review of their Progress on their 2014-2018 Strategic Goals

June 2, 2017: Deadline for Agencies to Submit Initial Draft of 2018-2022 Strategic Plan to OMB

September 2017: Agencies Submit Full Draft of 2018-2022 Strategic to OMB

December 22, 2017: Agencies Submit Final Draft of 2018-2022 Strategic Plan to OMB for Clearance

February 2018: Concurrent with the President's FY 2019 Budget, Agencies Publish 2018-2022 Strategic Plan and FY 2017 Annual Performance Report (Reporting their Final Progress on their 2014-2018 Strategic Goals)

Spring 2018: Agencies Conduct Annual Strategic Review of their Progress on their 2014-2018 Strategic Goals

February 2019: Concurrent with the President's FY 2020 Budget, Agencies Publish FY 2018 Annual Performance Report (Reporting their Initial Progress on their 2018-2022 Strategic Goals)

Figure 1: Agency Strategic Goal Timeline

For the purposes of illustration, Figure 2 highlights an example from the Department of Education’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan. In this plan, the Department of Education identified 4 strategic goals. Figure 2 includes information on the first strategic goal and a subset of its objectives and performance goals. This first strategic goal had a total of 4 objectives and 22 performance goals, with each objective having connected performance goals.

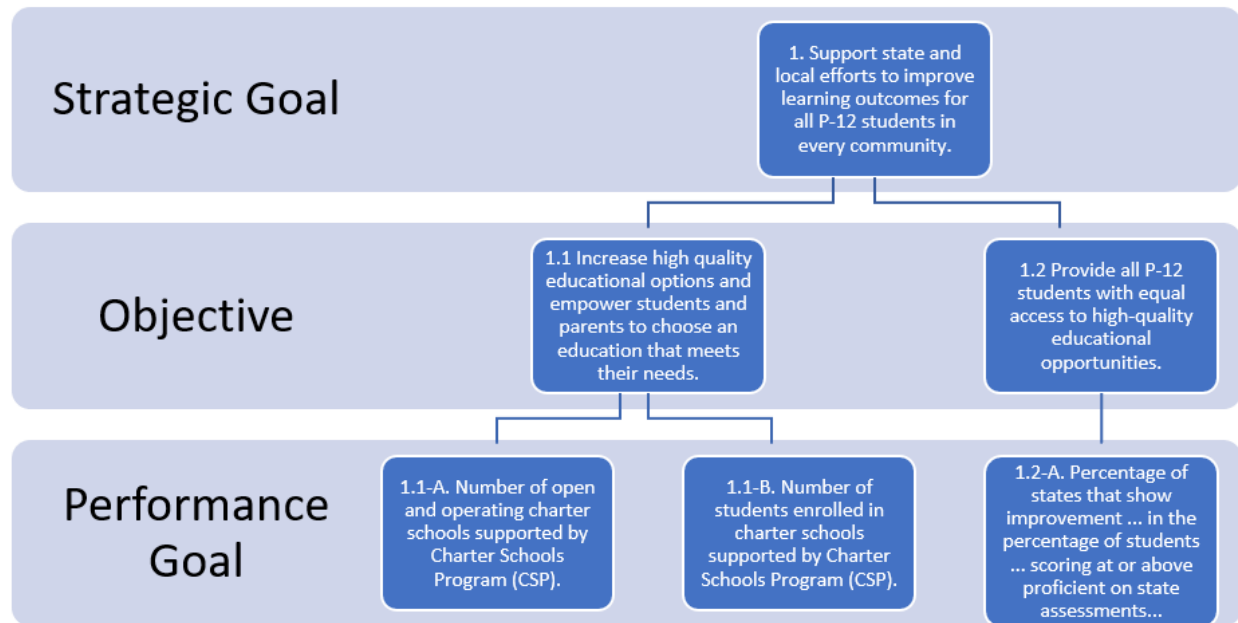


Figure 2: Department of Education 2018-2022 Goal Levels

This example highlights several features of the goal making process—the broad nature of strategic goals, the narrowing of focus from strategic goals down to performance goals, the quantifiable nature of performance goals, and the large number of metrics the agency can focus their attention on. This example further accentuates the difficulty in changing strategic goals, as it is unlikely the Department of Education’s commitment to P-12 education could be eliminated.

Strategic goals are central to our analysis because they speak to the core of the agency’s mission and activities. Therefore, a change in a strategic goal will have a larger and more long-term effect on an agency, than a change in a lower-level goal. Additionally, the broad nature of these goals makes them a hard test case. For example, it is unlikely for the Department of Homeland Security to not have a goal focused on preventing terrorism.

One natural question we may have about strategic goals is the degree to which they matter or represent tangible policy intentions. To answer this question, we may first look to managers within federal agencies that are responsible for carrying out these goals. In a 2017 GAO survey, approximately 70% of career Senior Executive Service (SES) managers reported that managers at their level are held accountable to a great or very great extent for accomplishing agency strategic goals and that they have the decision-making authority needed to help the agency accomplish those goals (GAO 2017). We may also look to those that have overseen the goal process. Robert Shea, former Associate Director of OMB during the W. Bush administration, stated that the administration attempted to make agency goal setting “represent the priorities the administration [was] trying to accomplish” (Beitsch 2020). Shea further argued that performance measures provide the White House with “a lot of leverage” to hold agencies accountable (Beitsch 2020). Finally, we can look to agency budgets to assess whether goal change is associated with changes in agency focus and budget allocations. In addition to the previously mentioned case of goal change in the EPA, when the Department of Justice added the strategic goal of “Secure the Borders and Enhance Immigration Enforcement and Adjudication” in their 2018-2022 strategic plan, they highlighted an increase of \$65.9 million in funding for “immigration-related

program enhancements” (DOJ 2018b). This included funding to hire 450 new immigration judges and support staff at the Executive Office for Immigration Review, 70 new immigration prosecutors at the Offices of the United States Attorneys, and 20 new paralegal support staff at the Office of Immigration Litigation (DOJ 2018a). While this evidence is only suggestive, it all points to agency goals having a meaningful impact on the work of agency employees and goal change symbolizing significant policy and resource realignment.

Priority Goals

A finer-grained case in the goal making process is priority goals. GPRAMA requires that the most high-profile agencies⁵ determine, in consultation with OMB⁶, a small subset (typically 3-5) of their many performance goals to be identified as priority goals every two years. Recall that performance goals are two levels below strategic goals (as shown in Figure 2) and that any one strategic goal can have more than 20 performance goals connected to it.⁷

Priority goals are to “reflect the highest priorities of the agency” as decided by the head of the agency and informed by OMB’s government wide priority goals. In addition to identifying these goals on a biannual basis, agencies are required to select a high-level agency official, often a political appointee, to be a goal leader responsible for the oversight of the goal’s completion and are required to report quarterly on their progress towards the completion of these goals.

Examining these goals has two key advantages. First, these goals allow for the observation of policy change at a lower level. Given the narrow, short-term focus of priority goals, a president focused on making a quick change in the direction of agencies activities may look to target these goals. Second, these goals allow us to explicitly test whether goals change within an administration has a similar effect as goal change across administrations, as these goals were set twice during the Obama administration (2014-2015 and 2016-2017) and twice during the Trump administration (2018-2019 and 2020-2021).

In order to observe change across agencies in their strategic and priority goals, we have gathered the final round of goals in the Obama administration and the first set of goals in the Trump Administration. In total, we gathered 56 strategic plans from 56 agencies including 219 strategic goals from the end of the Obama administration (2014-2018) with subsequent strategic goals in the Trump administration (2018-2022). Additionally, we collected 266 agency priority goals from 21 agencies that span across three periods—2014-2015, 2016-2017, and 2018-2019.⁸

By comparing goals in the Obama administration to the goals in the Trump administration, we coded an ordinal measure of goal change. Specifically, we examine whether the policy area addressed by the goal continues in the next period and, if the subject is addressed, whether the substance of the goal changes. For each goal, we coded the policy area using the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) subtopic codes. The CAP categorizes all areas of public policy into 21 broad areas (e.g., Agriculture, Health, Labor, etc.) and 220 subtopics that fall within those broad areas (e.g., Subsidies to Farmers, Health Care Reform, Worker

⁵22 of the most prominent agencies are required to produce priority goals. These are comprised of 22 of the 24 Chief Financial Officer Act (CFO Act) agencies. These include all cabinet level departments, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the General Services Administration (GSA), the National Aeronautics and Science Administration (NASA), the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Social Security Administration (SSA).

⁶While both strategic and priority goals must go through multiple rounds of OMB review, priority goals have additional requirements that give OMB even greater influence. To begin with, OMB determines the number of priority goals provided to the agency. Additionally, agencies are explicitly instructed to select goals that advance priorities for agency leadership and the administration (OMB Circular A-11 250.3). They are further advised to take objectives set in the president’s State of the Union Address and in presidential executive orders when deciding their priority goals (OMB Circular A-11 250.4). Finally, they oversee the performance of the agency in achieving their goals, with mandated quarterly reports. When agencies do not meet their goals, they are required to report to OMB on why they did not achieve their goal and how they will make improvements to reach the goal in the future.

⁷Performance goals are subcomponents of objectives, which are subcomponents of strategic goals.

⁸Of the 22 agencies responsible for producing priority goals, 21 have reported 3 sets of priority goals. This provides a point of comparison for each agency, minus the Department of Energy. The Department of Energy has not reported priority goals for the 2018-2019 period. They are the only one of the other 22 statutorily required agencies that have not done so. We made numerous attempts to contact the agency to see if these goals were in existence but had not been publicly reported. Overall, 183 agency priority goals have a subsequent comparison to observe how these goals change within and across administrations.

Safety, etc.). The level of change variable is coded 2 if the topic or subject of the goal does not continue in the next period. This is coded by determining if the CAP subtopic code of the goal does not remain in one of the sequential period’s strategic goals. The variable is coded 0 if the goal remains exactly the same. This is coded by determining whether the text of the goal is an exact match or within a few words, while retaining the same meaning and substance, with a strategic goal in the subsequent period. Finally, the level of change is coded 1 when the topic or subject of the goal remains the same, while the meaning or substance of the goal changes. Therefore, in these instances the CAP subtopic code remains the same, while the text of the goal changes in a significant manner. Figure 3 highlights examples of each type of goal change.

Exact Same	
Federal Maritime Commission 2014-2018: Maintain an efficient and competitive international ocean transportation system.	Federal Maritime Commission 2018-2022: Maintain an efficient and competitive international ocean transportation system.
Homeland Security 2014-2018: Strengthen National Preparedness and Resilience.	Homeland Security 2018-2022: Strengthen Preparedness and Resilience.
Meaningful Change	
DOJ 2014-2018: Prevent Crime, Protect the Rights of the American People, and Enforce Federal Law.	DOJ 2018-2022: Reduce Violent Crime and Promote Public Safety.
Education 2014-2018: Continuous Improvement of the U.S. Education System.	Education 2018-2022: Support state and local efforts to improve learning outcomes for all P-12 students in every community.
Eliminated	
HUD 2014-2018: Meet the Need for Quality, Affordable Rental Homes.	HUD 2018-2022: Reimagine the Way HUD Works.
VA 2014-2018: Enhance and Develop Trusted Partnerships.	VA 2018-2022: Veterans Trust VA to be Consistently Accountable and Transparent.

Figure 3: Examples of Goal Coding

Across the Obama and Trump administrations, there was considerable goal change. Approximately 15.5% of strategic goals and 63% of priority goals were eliminated in the subsequent period, with an additional 45.7% and 16.3% experiencing some level of change between periods respectively. The remaining 38.8% of strategic goals and 20.7% of priority goals remained exactly or substantively the same across periods. These descriptive statistics suggest that agencies experience frequent changes to even their most core directives from one administration to the next.

Separation Rates

We use publicly available data on agency employment and separations from the Office of Personnel Management made available at <https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/>. We subset this data to employees who are full-time non-seasonal employees who are not Schedule C appointees or non-Career Senior Executive Service appointees. The data does not explicitly identify presidential appointees without Senate confirmation, however, this type of appointee is mostly in the Executive Office of the President. The data does not explicitly identify presidential appointees who require Senate confirmation; however, when looking at executive departments as we do in the analysis that follows, Senate-confirmed appointees are a sufficiently small number of total employees that their separations will not have a significant effect on department-level separation rates.

Employee Morale (Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey)

We use publicly available survey data on employee satisfaction with their organization and job gathered by the Office of Personnel Management through the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). In particular, we focus on three questions: (1) “How satisfied are you with the policies and practices of your senior leaders?”, (2) “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?”, and (3) “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?” These questions capture employee satisfaction that should influence an employee’s commitment to their agency and their future career decisions. Response were aggregated at the agency-level and comparisons are made between responses in the first year of previous goal period and the first year of the subsequent goal period. For example, when comparing changes in priority goals within the Obama administration (2014-2015 to 2016-2017), we compared responses in 2014 to responses in 2016.

Analysis: Descriptive Results and Proof of Concept

Using goal change to measure policy change and using that measure to predict changes in agency morale and separation rates present two primary challenges. First, the marginal effect of a single separation on an agency’s separation rate (defined as $\frac{\text{number of separations}}{\text{number of employees}} \times 100$) is larger for small agencies than large agencies. Additionally, small agencies are more likely to observe no separations in a given period than large agencies. These points taken together mean that we are more likely to observe small agencies with both very low and very high separations rates (i.e., small agencies are more likely to appear in the tails of the distribution of separation rates). This statistical artifact makes it difficult to compare separation rates among agencies with large differences in total employees (see Libgober and Richardson 2021 for expansion of this point and development of a method to address it). This statistical artifact also applies to the comparison of proportions of employees who give certain survey responses among agencies that vary significantly in size. Second, most agencies have no changes in their strategic goals or all of their strategic goals are changed or eliminated. Moreover, nearly all of the strategic goals for executive departments are either changed or eliminated during the Trump administration and small agencies tend to have no change in their strategic goals. Together, the overdispersion of separation rates in small agencies where the proportion of strategic goals changed or eliminated tends to be 0 and executive departments with separation rates nearer the center of the distribution where the proportion of strategic goal changed or eliminated tends to be 1 results in a muted effect of goal change on separation rates. At this point, we view this result as attributable to the effect of agency size on the distribution of separation rates rather than evidence against our theory. We include a figure illustrating this relationship in the appendix. In the following analysis, we focus on priority goals because we observe more variation in the proportion of priority goals that are changed or eliminated and we focus on executive departments and the Environmental Protection Agency because they are sufficiently large to eliminate overdispersion in separation rates due to small denominators.

Priority Goal Change and Separation Rates in the Trump Administration

We begin by analyzing the the bivariate relationship between the proportion of priority goals that were changed or eliminated and three separation rates during the Trump administration. In addition to the overall separation rate ($\frac{\text{number of separations}}{\text{number of employees}} \times 100$), we look at the separation rate among career members of the Senior Executive Service ($\frac{\text{number of career SES separations}}{\text{number of career SES}} \times 100$), and the quit rate ($\frac{\text{number of quits}}{\text{number of employees}} \times 100$). For the denominator, we use the number of employees (or career SES) in the agency on 12/13/2016. For the numerator, we use the number of separations from 01/01/2017 to 08/31/2020, which is the most recent date currently available. A strength of this measure is that it provides a summary measure of turnover during the Trump administration that is comparable across agencies. A weakness is that we do not track the same individuals across time. Unfortunately, individuals cannot be tracked across reporting periods in publicly available federal personnel data from the Trump administration.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between the proportion of strategic goals changed and the separation rate. (The shaded region in all figures gives the 95% confidence interval for \hat{y} .) First, there is not a clear relationship between agency ideology and goal change. (We measure agency ideology using measures developed by

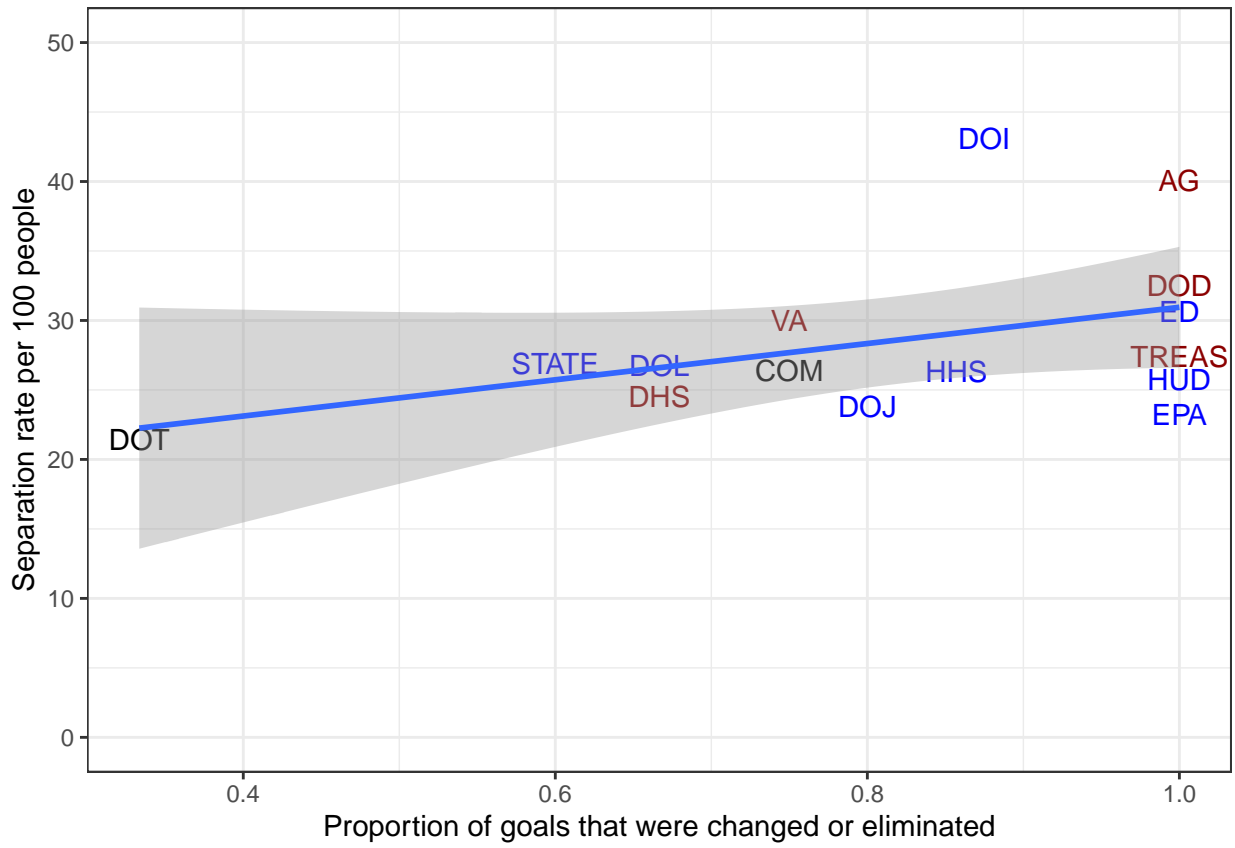


Figure 4: Priority Goal Change and Separation Rate in the Trump Administration

Richardson, Clinton and Lewis (2018).⁹) There is a mix of liberal (blue text) and conservative agencies (red text) between 0.6 and 0.8 on the x-axis and a mix clustered at 1 on the x-axis. One case that does conform to expectations is the Department of Transportation (DOT). It is moderate, has a low level of goal change, and a low separation rate. Overall, we see a positive relationship between goal change and separation rate. Model 1 in Table 1 contains the bivariate OLS model depicted in Figure 4. The coefficient on goal change is 13, indicating going from no goal change to complete goal change is associated with an increase in separation rate of 13 people per hundred. The 90% confidence interval is [-0.6, 26.7] (p-value = 0.11). Therefore, going from a goal change of 0.5 to 1 which is similar to going from DOT to HUD, DOD, or EPA is associated with an increase in the separation rate of 6.5 people per hundred.

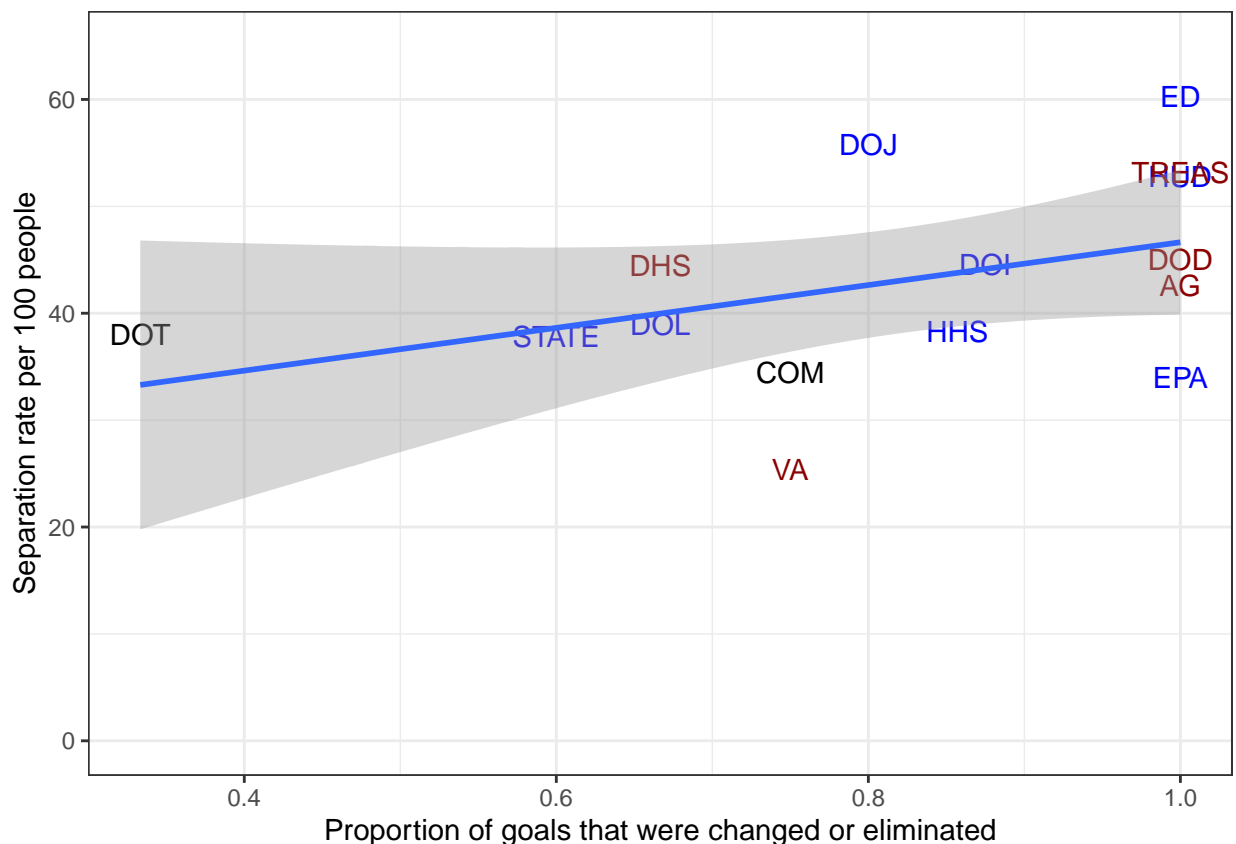


Figure 5: Priority Goal Change and Separation Rate (SES)

Figure 5 replicates the analysis in Figure 4 for the separation rate among career SES. The relationship is very similar to that in Figure 4. In Model 2 in Table 1, the coefficient on goal change is 20, indicating going from no goal change to complete goal change is associated with an increase in separation rate of career SES of 20 people per hundred. The 90% confidence interval is [-1.2, 41.2] (p-value = 0.12).

Finally, Figure 6 replicates the analysis for the quit rate. We analyze the quit rate because quitting is a more costly form of exit than retiring and should be indicative of a greater level of employee dissatisfaction. The slope of the fitted line is flat. In Model 3 in Table 1, the coefficient on goal change is 1 and the 90% confidence interval is [-8.1, 11] (p-value = 0.76). We don't find an association between goal change and quit rate, which is consistent with findings that exit is greater among senior federal civil servants (who often retire rather than quit) given a change in party control (e.g., Bolton et al., 2019).

⁹We code an agency as liberal if the 95% credible interval excludes zero and the point estimate on perceived ideology is negative, we code an agency as conservative if the 95% credible interval excludes 0 and the point estimate in positive, and we code an agency as moderate otherwise.

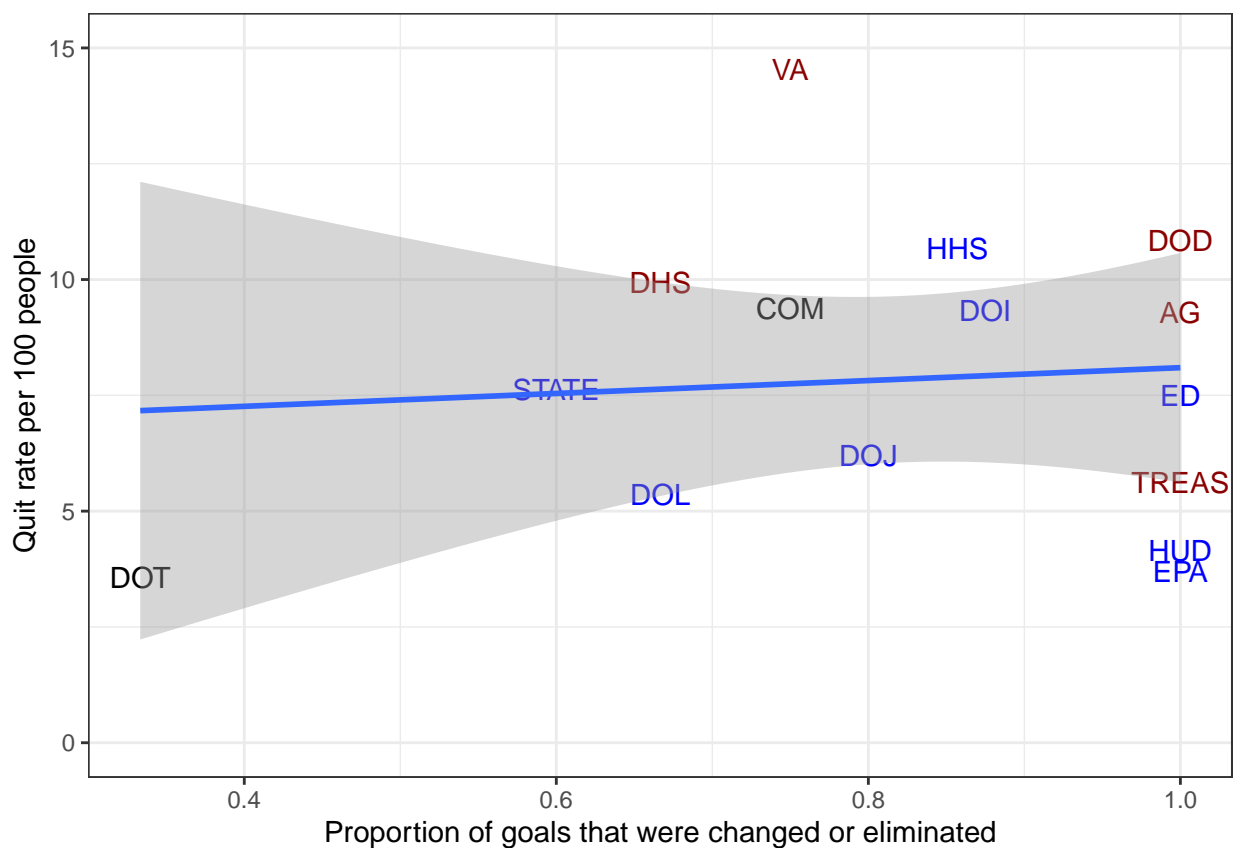


Figure 6: Priority Goal Change and Quit Rate

Table 1: OLS Models of Goal Change and Separation Rates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Sep. Rate (1)	SES Sep. Rate (2)	Quit Rate (3)
Goal Change	13.046 (7.690)	20.017 (11.971)	1.392 (4.378)
Constant	17.903** (6.472)	26.623** (10.076)	6.706* (3.684)
Observations	15	15	15
R ²	0.181	0.177	0.008
Adjusted R ²	0.118	0.114	-0.069
Residual Std. Error (df = 13)	5.658	8.808	3.221
F Statistic (df = 1; 13)	2.878	2.796	0.101

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Overall, Figures 5 and 6 and the bivariate models in Table 1 provide a proof of concept. We do find an association between priority goal change and separation rates among all full-time permanent employees and among career SES. To be clear, this evidence is not dispositive nor have we estimated a causal effect. Rather we view this evidence as suggesting that change in policy goals is capturing change in civil servants' utility and that further development of such a measure is worthwhile, which we discuss below. While we are pleased that we have found this relationship with only 15 observations, we remain cautious about making any strong claims without addressing the potential for omitted variable bias.

Goal Change and Job Satisfaction

Changes in policy goals and the associated change in civil servants' utility may often be insufficient to induce a civil servant to exit her agency. Therefore, we also analyze the relationship between priority goal change and the three questions from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) listed below. We analyze the relationship between priority goal change and the change in proportion of respondents who state that they are satisfied or very satisfied from the year before the goal change and the year after the goal change. (Response options are very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied.) Specifically, we calculate change in satisfaction as $\text{proportion satisfied or very satisfied}_{t_1} - \text{proportion satisfied or very satisfied}_{t_0}$ where t_1 is the survey conducted the year after the goal change and t_0 is the survey conducted the year before the goal change. In the Trump Administration $t_1 = 2018$ and $t_0 = 2016$ and in the Obama Administration where $t_0 = 2014$ and $t_1 = 2016$.

1. How satisfied are you with the policies and practices of your senior leaders?
2. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?
3. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?

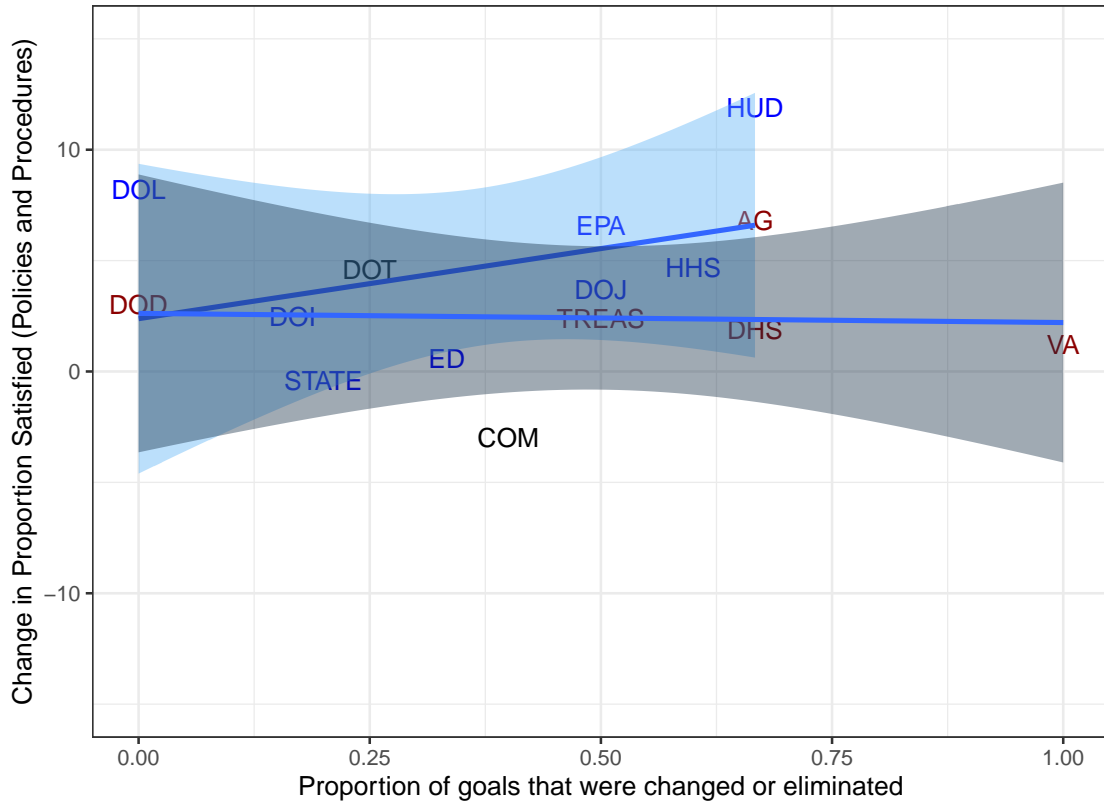
We selected these questions because they relate specifically to satisfaction with policies (1) or overall satisfaction with the job or organization (2). If goal change reduces satisfaction, then there should be a negative correlation between the proportion of respondents who report they are satisfied or very satisfied and the proportion of priority goals that are changed or eliminated. Relative to the separation data, survey measures should respond more quickly to changes in job satisfaction and measure reductions in job satisfaction that are insufficient to induce separation. One concern we have is the effect of separation on agency-level satisfaction. If the most dissatisfied respondents leave at time t_0 (and are not replaced or replaced with more satisfied employees), then observed agency-level satisfaction will be higher than the counterfactual observation had those employees stayed. Unfortunately, we have no way to track individual survey respondents across time.

Figures 7-9 show the relationship between these measures of employee satisfaction and the proportion of priority goals that were changed or eliminated in the Obama administration and the Trump administration. While trends are consistent across measures of satisfaction within administrations, we lack sufficient precision to differentiate the slope coefficients from zero with high-degrees of confidence for any of the relationships depicted in Figures 7-9.

For the Obama administration, we may find no relationship between goal change and employee satisfaction because the data are from late in President Obama's second term. At this point, we expect changes in goals to have limited effect on job satisfaction because job satisfaction already reflects 6 years of Obama-administration policies and because many civil servants most dissatisfied by Obama's policies likely exited in earlier periods. Nonetheless, the direction of the relationship between goal change and employee satisfaction in liberal agencies is positive. The relationship is flat in moderate and conservative agencies.

Turning to the Trump administration, we see a negative relationship between goal change and job satisfaction regardless of agency ideology. Additionally changes in job satisfaction are consistent with anecdotal reports. The Department of State, Department of Education, and Environmental Protection Agency show large decreases in job satisfaction. The Department of Homeland Security shows a large increase in job satisfaction, consistent with we would expect given that the employee unions of Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement endorsed President Trump during the 2016 elections and the subsequent increases in funding and staff that the Trump administration directed to those agencies. (CBP and ICE accounted for about 40% of DHS employees as of September 30, 2017.)

Obama Administration



Trump Administration

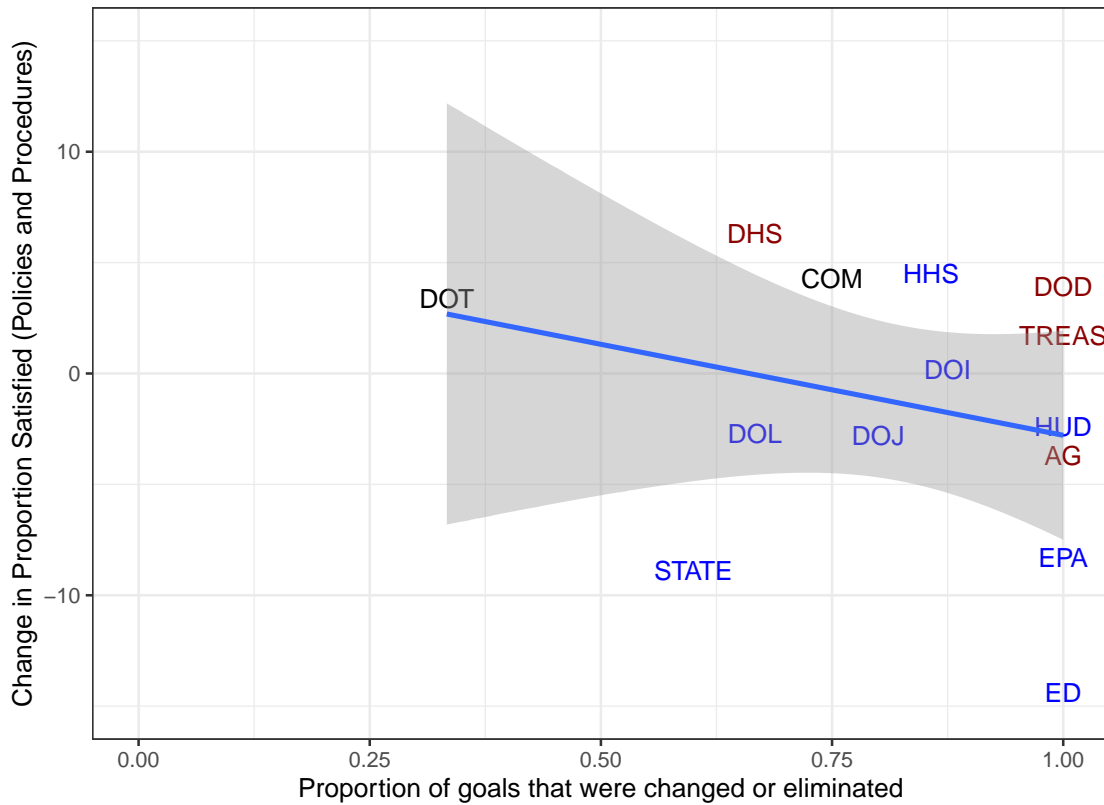
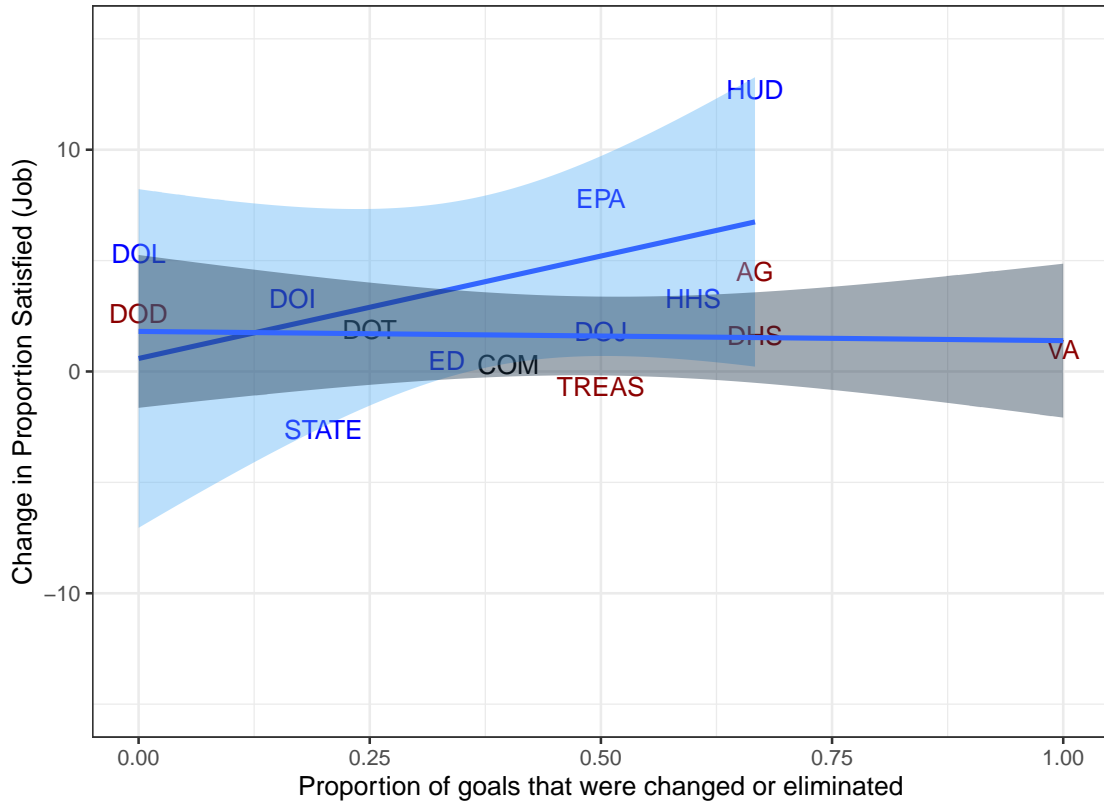


Figure 7: Goal Change and Satisfaction with Policies and Procedures of Senior Leaders

Obama Administration



Trump Administration

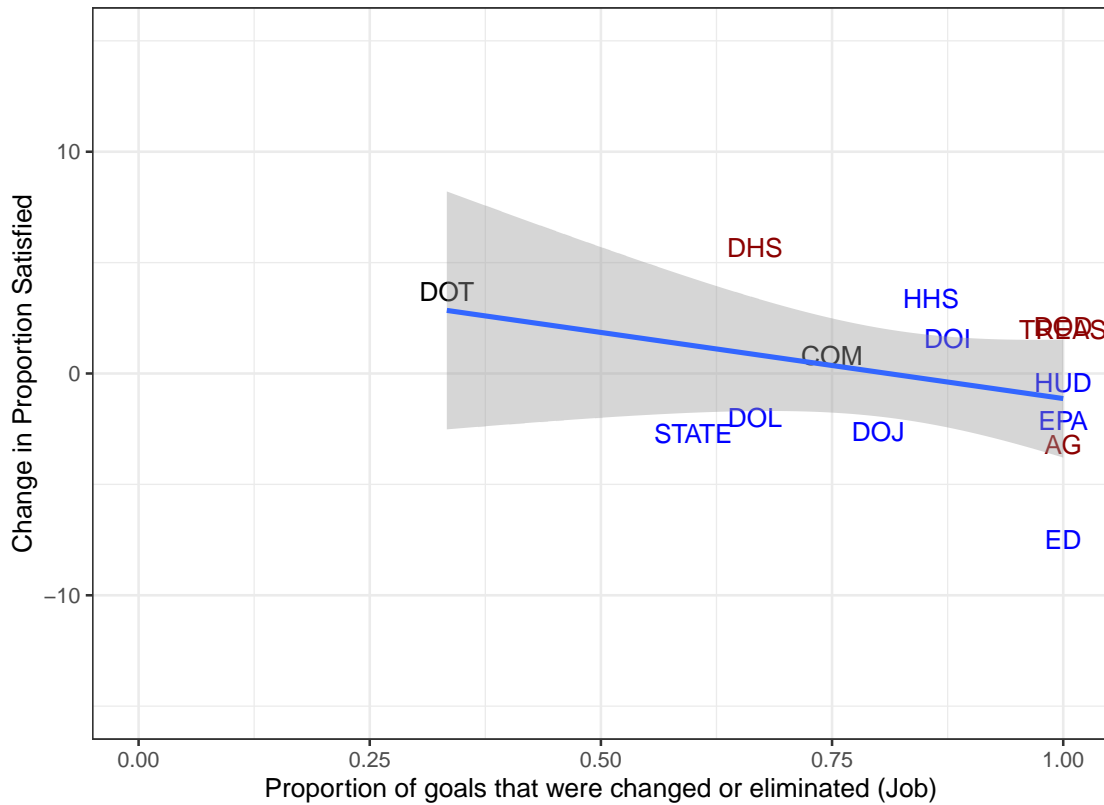
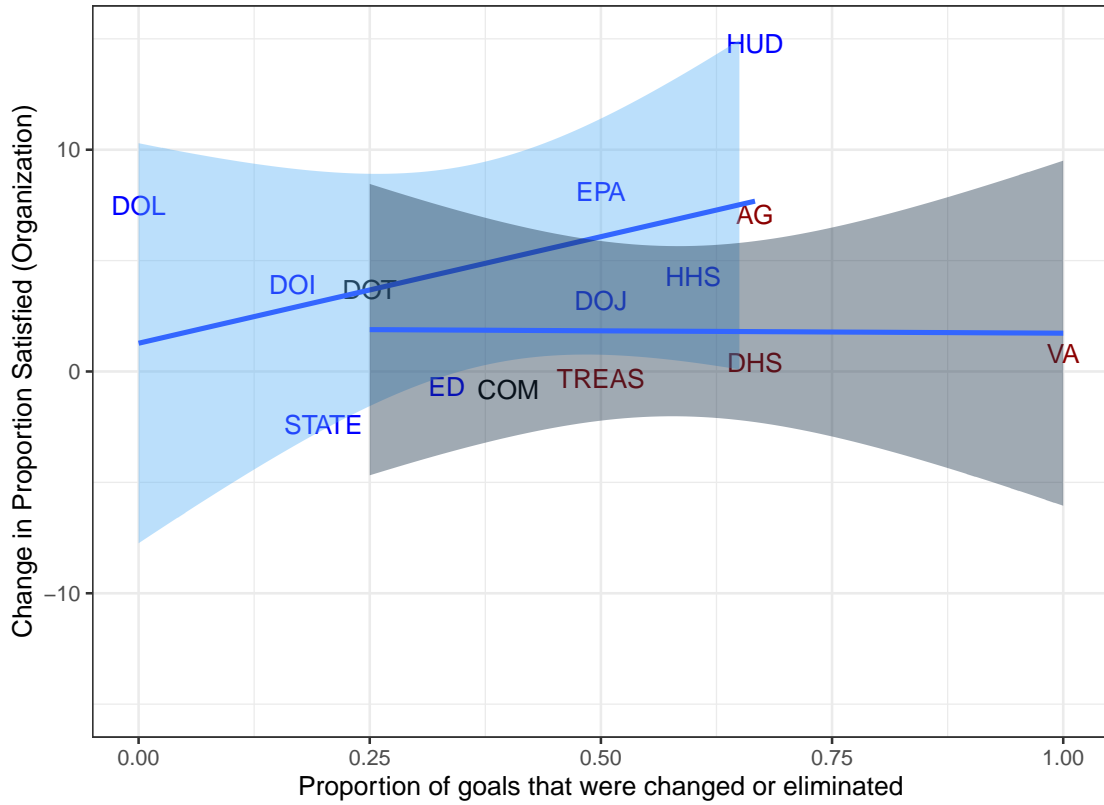


Figure 8: Goal Change and Satisfaction with Job

Obama Administration



Trump Administration

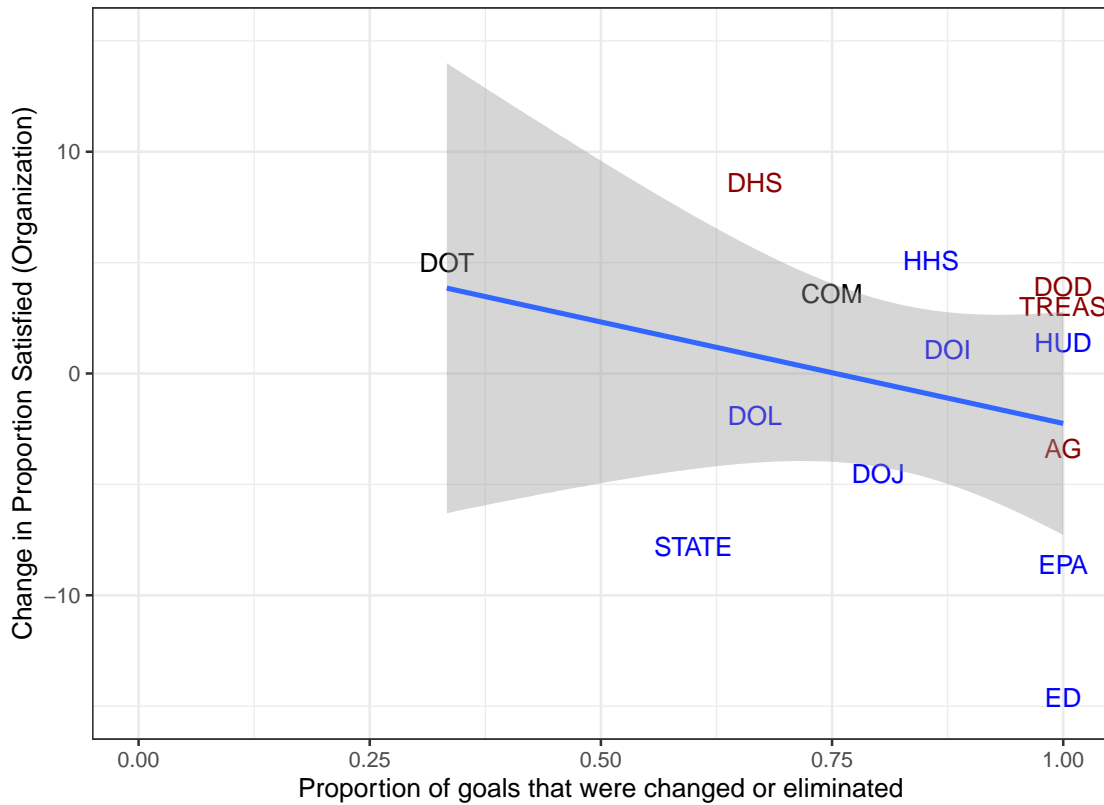


Figure 9: Goal Change and Satisfaction with Organization
16

Discussion

The primary contribution of this paper is using change in agency goals to measure variation in policy change across agencies and across administrations to better understand heterogeneity in the effects of agency politicization on civil servants career decisions and job satisfaction. We have shown that a positive relationship exists between changes in priority goals and separation rates in executive departments and the EPA during the Trump administration. While changes in job satisfaction during the Trump administration are consistent with anecdotal reports and we do find a negative point estimate for slope coefficients between goal change and job satisfaction, we cannot differentiate these coefficients from zero with high confidence. The flat relationships between changes in goals and job satisfaction in the Obama administration are consistent with what we might expect late in an administration when administration policies have been in effect for 6 years meaning that changes in goals likely reflect smaller changes in policy than occurs after a change in the party of the president.

Further development of this paper requires refinement of our goal change measure. While variation in the proportion of priority goals that are changed or eliminated exists, these goals are only available for about 20 agencies. The proportion of strategic goals changed or eliminated tends to be 0 or 1 with limited observations between these two extremes. Our primary focus is on improving this measure and we have two possible improvements. First, we plan to explore alternative coding using more sophisticated text analysis to better capture changes in goals. Second, we plan to try to map priority goals to sub-units within executive departments to better identify employees whose jobs are most affected by a given goal. We also plan to use novel survey data on perceptions of goal changes among civil servants to validate that changes in goals are associated with changes in the on-the-job experiences of civil servants. (We also need better data on separations and job satisfaction, particularly individual-level data that would allow us to both increase our number of observations and isolate individuals affected by policy change.)

Lastly, our hypotheses in this paper conditioned on agency ideology, but we did not find that the effect goal change on separation rates is conditional on agency ideology. The figures in this paper show that the Trump administration is characterized by widespread turnover and declines in job satisfaction that do not comport with expectations of trends conditional on ideological congruence with the president. This creates a challenge for scholars comparing trends in exit rates and job satisfaction in the Trump administration to previous administrations in an effort to add to our evidence testing theories of the effects of politicization on civil servants career decisions.

Conclusion

When President Trump was inaugurated, it was expected that major policy shifts would be made, but the actual size and scope of those changes was startling to many career civil servants (Badger, Bui, and Parlapiano 2021). At liberal leaning agencies like the EPA and the Department of Education, priorities shifted away from topics such as equity and climate change towards school choice and the permitting process. Additionally, even in conservative leaning departments like the Department of Agriculture, the Trump administration redirected the agency away from core issues like food security and sustainability. These types of changes altered what it meant to be an employee of these agencies. Civil servants were, therefore, presented with a dilemma. They could either remain in a job that was less fulfilling or leave the agency.

In this paper, we present evidence that both of those decisions that is associated with agency policy change. First, agencies that experienced higher rates of goal change experienced higher separation rates overall and among their career SES employees.

Additionally, these same agencies had larger increases in the proportion of employees unhappy with the organization and their jobs (although we lack the data to estimate effects of goal changes on employee satisfaction with sufficient precision to make strong claims). These results provide empirical support for existing assumptions that changes in policy across administrations affect civil servants' job satisfaction and career choices. Further, they suggest that the policy decisions made by presidents and their appointees have considerable influence on the work experience of civil servants and the makeup of an agency's workforce. Finally, using changes in policy goals to measures changes in policy across agencies and across administrations

is a fruitful way to better understand heterogeneity in agency politicization and its resultant effects on civil servants careers.

Appendix

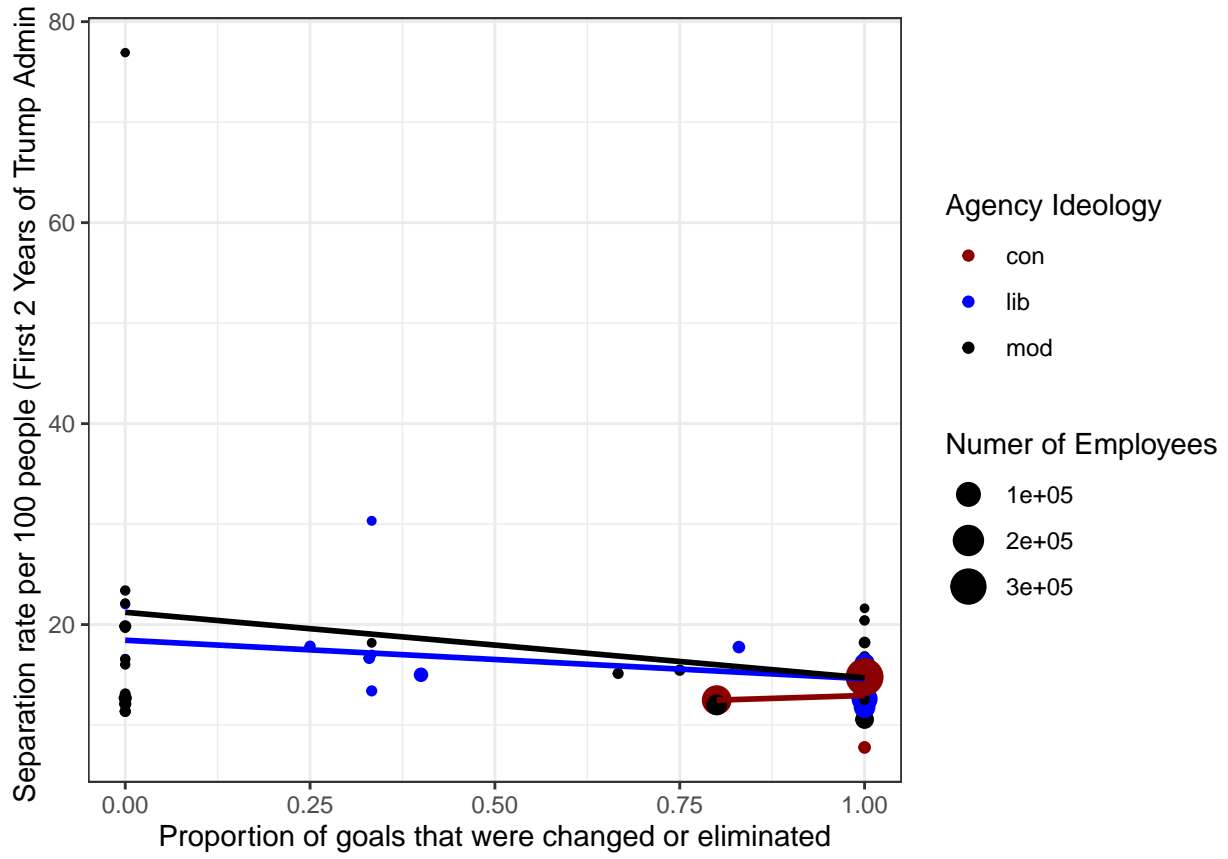
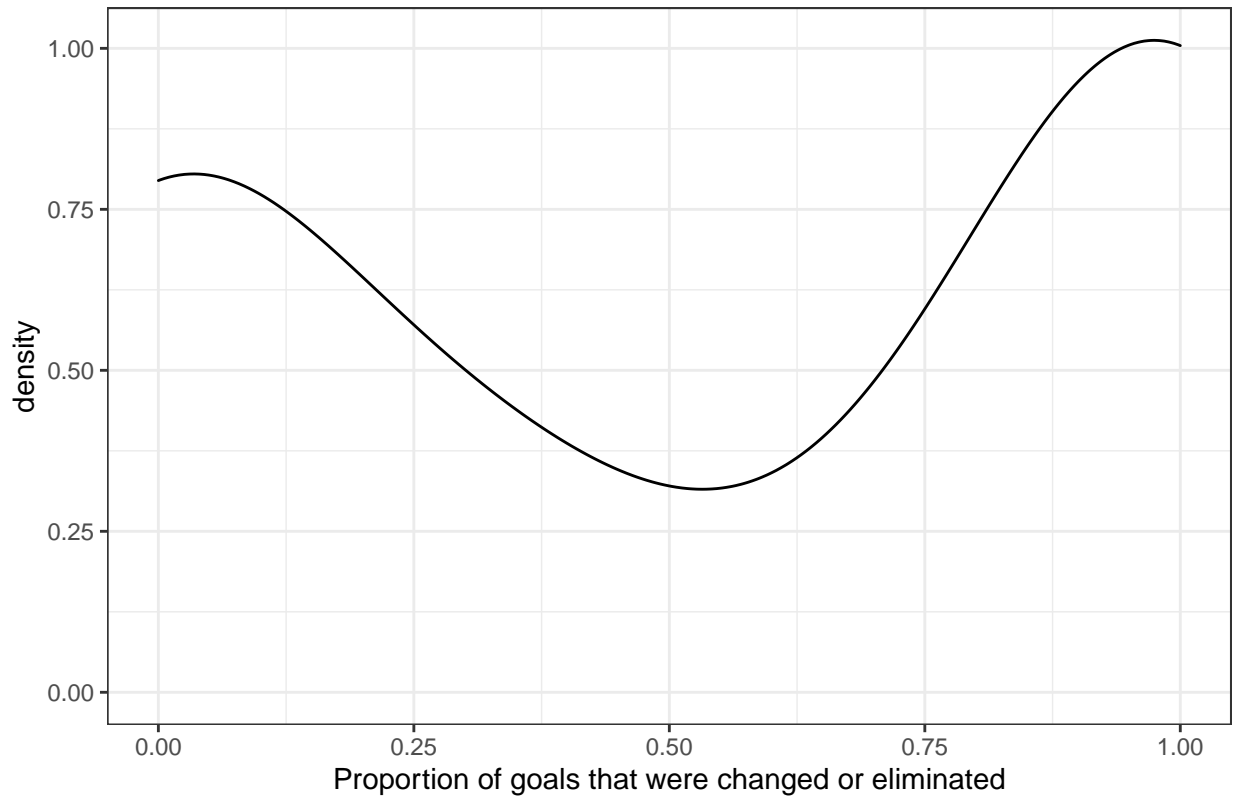
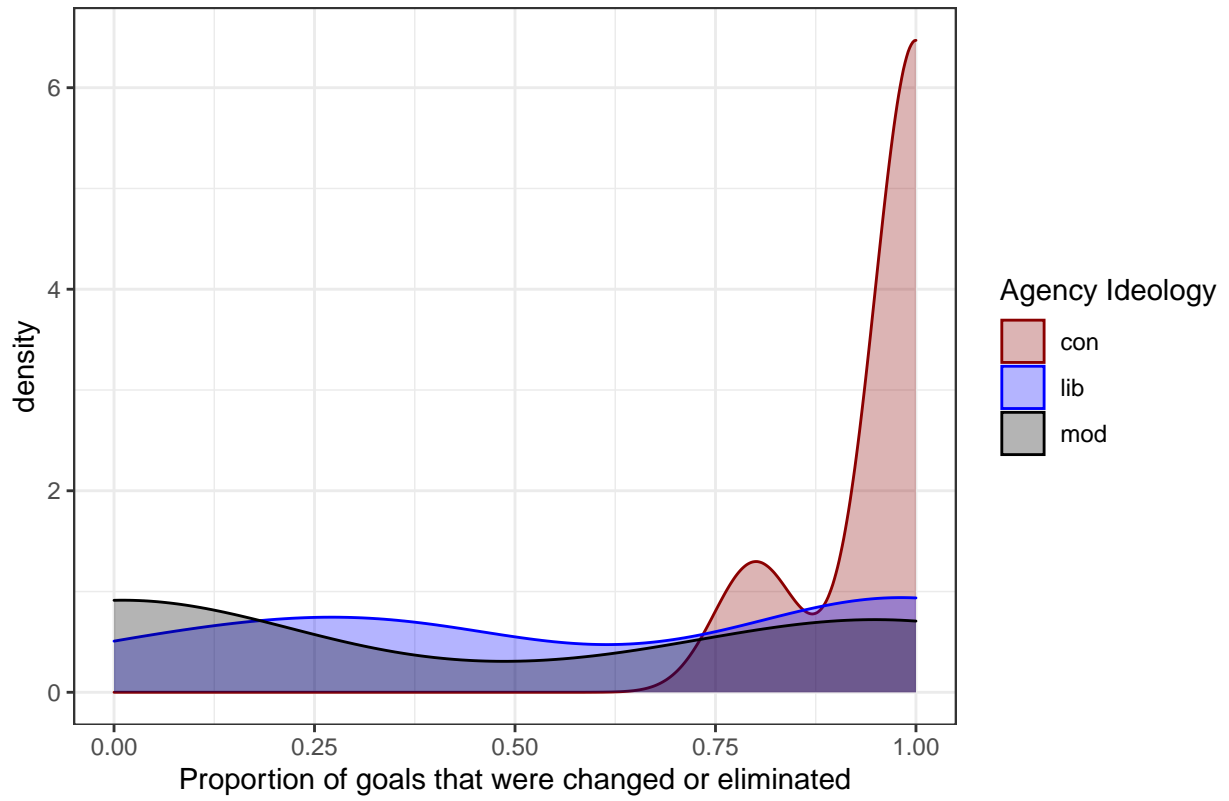


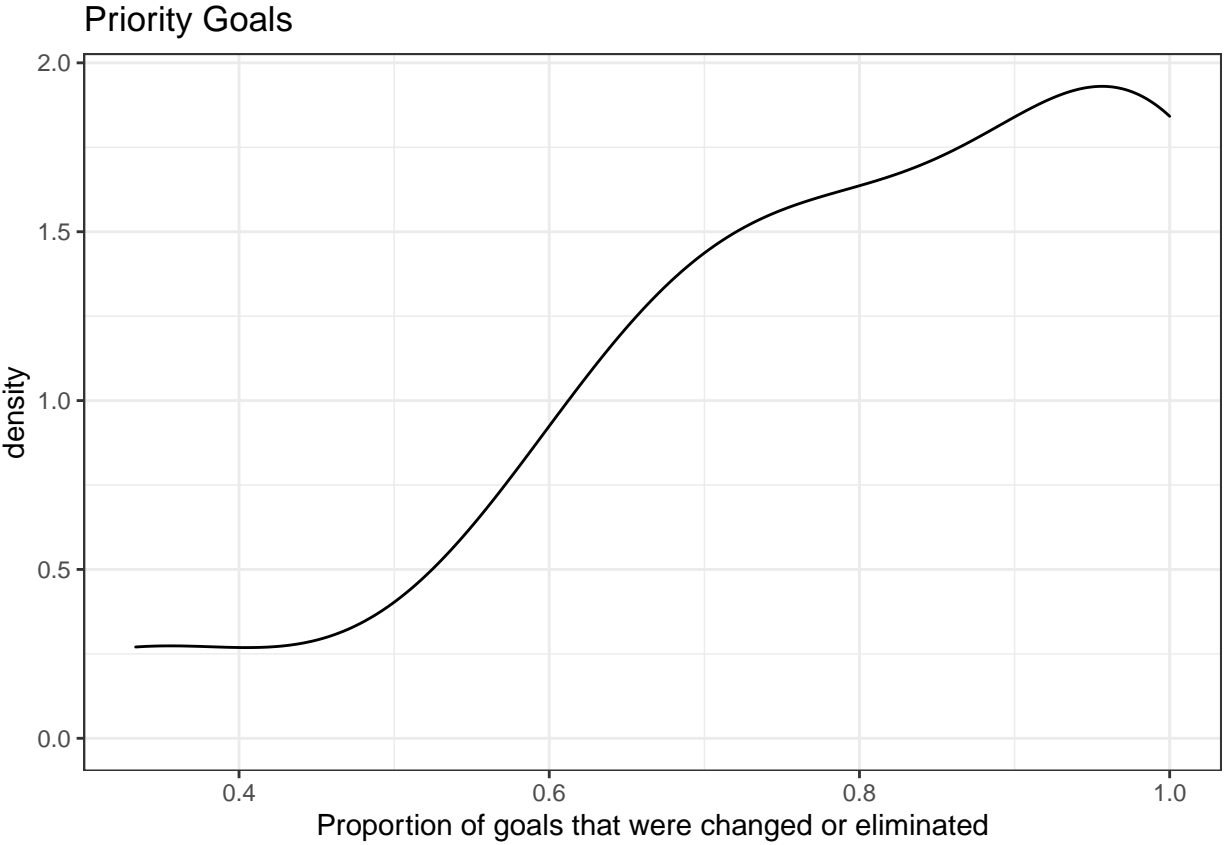
Figure 10: Illustration of Challenges Created When Comparing Rates in Small Agencies and Large Agencies

Strategic Goals



Strategic Goals





Strategic Goals

