

Walking the moral tightrope: Exploring the effect of the Trump presidency on the civil service

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During his presidency, Donald Trump and members of his administration repeatedly accused federal civil servants of undermining their agenda through the "deep state." They sought to curtail career employees' workplace protections, sought to severely cut some agencies' funding, and in some cases attempted to undermine or alter agency missions.

Hamilton College Associate Professor of Sociology Jaime Kucinkas and Yvonne Zylan, an independent scholar, published the article "Walking

the Moral Tightrope: Federal Civil Servants' Loyalties, Caution, and Resistance under the Trump Administration" in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

The authors addressed the question, "How did mid- and high-level career [civil servants](#) across agencies experience and respond to the Trump administration? Were the career corps as loyal to mission, risk averse, and serially partisan or nonpartisan as most public administration research instead describes?"

Kucinkas and Zylan's findings raise concerns about the vulnerability of the United States government to further democratic backsliding and deterioration under a future more competent autocratic leader.

Based on 127 interviews with employed and former mid- and high-level career civil servants during the first three years of the Trump administration, the authors found that, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the Trump administration, most civil servants largely sought to comply at work, circumscribed by their loyalties to acting appropriately within the scope of their mandates.

This was despite the fact that respondents reported again and again of a uniquely toxic, unpredictable, and fear-based political leadership class—one that rendered long-standing norms of bureaucratic service unstable guides to action. The employees tread a kind of moral and ethical tightrope stretched perilously between two poles, toeing the line on the one hand and "guerillas" resisting within a "deep state" on the other.

Kucinkas and Zylan found that a range of intuitive, habitual, and conscious, deliberative moral and ethical calculations characterized the respondents' actions and their interpretations of what they were doing. Under repressive leadership, there was less room for use of institutional

voice, and incentives to exit increased.

Few if any of their respondents exhibited extreme behavior. Instead, they searched for ways to uphold multiple, often competing, professional, institutional, and ethical commitments while avoiding violations of the Hatch act or putting themselves at risk of political retribution. They worried about acting in complicity with an increasingly repressive regime, but seemed to worry more about violating professional and institutional norms of loyalty to agency, mission, and government,

Under these conditions, the options for safely expressing opposition dramatically narrowed. Previously sanctioned forms of voice, including institutionalized grievance and dissent mechanisms, became politicized and personalized, making them riskier and less compatible with civil service norms of loyalty and non-partisanship.

Most of the authors' informants expressed alarm at the potential for harm to the federal government and the public posed by the [new administration](#)

Over time, these concerns led many career civil servants to engage in a diverse set of practices, some of which may reasonably be characterized as forms of resistance, though few of our respondents described them as such. Instead, career civil servants tended to frame their actions neither as resistance nor acquiescence, but as variations of acceptable bureaucratic adaptation to changes in political leadership, staying largely within the lines set by the new administration and satisfying norms of institutional and agency loyalty.

Those who felt support from supervisors or colleagues were more likely to express dissent or subtly undermine or delay initiatives. Yet supervisors (especially in contentious agencies) were generally reticent to

support dissent, even as they expressed frustration and fear about the direction of their agencies.

No one understanding of "compliance" or "resistance" guided action. Even among the mid- and high-ranking career bureaucrats the authors interviewed, the influence of immediate colleagues and superiors was critical. They largely reinforced a risk-averse professional culture, but they also served as reference groups that might ratify resistant conduct where it arose.

The researchers also observed an expressed intention to leave their agencies. By the end of their study, one-fifth of the employees they had interviewed initially had left the federal government.

As the new administration adopted increasingly repressive political tactics over time, it fundamentally altered the sense of what was morally right and wrong in structuring civil servants' pragmatic, moral, and ethical assessments. This gave rise to some striking cracks in the coherence of the accounts expressed by even the most seasoned civil servants working in the most affected locations.

In interviews, they described failing to understand what was taking place, experiencing cognitive dissonance, and feeling deeply unsure of themselves and their environments.

The two authors completed three waves of semi-structured, in-depth interviews to track respondents' experiences over the course of the presidential term. They spoke with civil servants during the beginning, middle, and end of the [administration](#) (March–August, 2017, June–November 2018, and December 2019–March 2020, respectively).

For the [second wave](#), they tried to conduct follow-up interviews with all civil servants from the first round who were still working for the federal

government and spoke with 30 additional people. They conducted 19 follow-up interviews and interviewed two new informants in the third wave from the end of 2019 just prior to President Trump's impeachment trial in the Senate through mid-March, as the coronavirus pandemic shutdowns were beginning.

For their third wave of interviews, they contacted those working with high-level appointees and people likely to experience change, as those experiencing "significant change ... are more likely to notice the events and experiences that pushed or pulled them 'off course.'"

Their respondents worked in nearly all federal executive branch agencies—several of which were subject to considerable proposed budget cuts such, as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The largest group of civil servant interviews were in the EPA, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Department of State (DoS), as they were seeking to oversample in the most contentious and highest-ranking positions.

More information: Jaime Kucinkas et al, Walking the Moral Tightrope: Federal Civil Servants' Loyalties, Caution, and Resistance under the Trump Administration, *American Journal of Sociology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/725313](https://doi.org/10.1086/725313)

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