

# Blaming Bureaucrats

## How Political Leadership Shapes Civil Servants' Trust and Engagement\*

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### Abstract

When crises arise, elected officials often try to manage reputational risk through presentational strategies, or explanatory frames that contextualize their roles in creating and/or resolving the crises. We study how these choices reverberate inside government; specifically, we examine how executives' decisions to take responsibility or blame the civil servants subordinate to them affect their ability to maintain civil servants' trust and acceptance of their authority, on which they rely to induce civil servants to carry out their policy directives. Drawing on a pre-registered survey experiment of more than 2,500 state employees in nine US states, we show that civil servants deem executives who deflect blame onto their agencies as less trustworthy and are less inclined to exert themselves for the executive. Sharing or accepting responsibility fosters trust, especially when civil servants believe their agency bears fault. Presentational strategies are not costless: moves that leaders think protect them in the short run can degrade the organizational capacity they need to govern.

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In 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, under a state-appointed emergency manager, switched its water supply to the Flint River in an effort to cut costs. The river water was so polluted and corrosive that it caused lead to leach from aging pipes into the drinking supply. Residents quickly reported discolored, foul-smelling water coming from their faucets along with a range of accompanying health problems. For more than a year, however, despite evidence from independent scientists and local activists, officials at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the governor’s office downplayed or outright dismissed concerns. A state task force later concluded that the agency failed in its basic responsibility to enforce drinking water regulations (Flint Water Advisory Task Force, 2016).

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder offered some apologies for the incident but also shifted responsibility to others—especially the “career bureaucrats” at MDEQ who “made these terrible decisions that showed a clear lack of common sense.”<sup>1</sup> His deflection angered state workers. One MDEQ employee told Michigan Public Radio that Snyder’s accusations toward her department “rang hollow” and that morale was “the worst she’s ever seen it.”<sup>2</sup> Further, findings from a state-commissioned employee engagement survey in 2017 illustrate that, in the aftermath of the crisis, MDEQ expressed worse morale, sense of direction, trust in agency leadership, and engagement with their work than they had two years prior.<sup>3</sup>

Did Snyder’s decision to cast blame on the bureaucracy make state employees view him as a less credible leader and scale back their willingness to engage in the demanding work of public administration? Would the reaction inside MDEQ have been different had the governor accepted responsibility and offered support during a period of intense public scrutiny? These questions speak to a broader puzzle. Civil servants operate in settings where crises are common and where elected executives routinely frame those crises for external audiences. How civil servants interpret those messages, and whether executives’ explanations of failure shape trust, morale, and effort within the

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<sup>1</sup>Egan, Paul. “Gov. Rick Snyder blames ‘career bureaucrats’ for Flint water crisis.” *Detroit Free Press*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/03/17/snyder-blame-water-flint-criss/81900340/>.

<sup>2</sup>Brush, Mark, Lindsey Smith, and Rebecca Williams. “Will Gov. Snyder change the agency blamed for the Flint water crisis?” *Michigan Public Radio*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.michiganpublic.org/environment-science/2016-06-16/will-gov-snyder-change-the-agency-blamed-for-the-flint-water-crisis> (see also: Hinkley, Justin A. “Snyder’s Flint apology ‘an insult,’ state workers say.” *Detroit Free Press*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/01/20/snyders-flint-apology-insult-state-workers-say/79052694/>).

<sup>3</sup>Lawler, Emily. “State employees struggle with morale following Flint water crisis charges.” *MLive*, June 29, 2017, [https://www.mlive.com/news/2017/06/flint\\_water\\_state\\_employees.html](https://www.mlive.com/news/2017/06/flint_water_state_employees.html).

agencies they oversee, remains less well understood. The Flint case suggests that presentational choices can reverberate inside government, but it also raises the possibility that differences in how executives handle blame may influence the administrative capacity they ultimately depend upon.

In this paper, we examine how the presentational strategies that elected executives (e.g., presidents, prime ministers, governors, mayors) adopt in the wake of the “blame game” (Hood, 2011) around adverse outcomes—such as the Flint water crisis—shape civil servants’ perceptions of their leaders. While extant research explores how presentational strategies influence the public, the media, and other elected officials (Boin et al., 2010; Brändström, Kuipers and Daléus, 2008; Hood et al., 2009; Miller and Reeves, 2022; Moynihan, 2012), far less is known about how the same messages resonate inside government, even though civil servants are central to implementing executive priorities and are often implicated—fairly or not—in the crises that trigger these blame contests (Hinterleitner, 2026). Civil servants also constitute a distinct audience. They possess information about agency performance, experience the reputational and psychological consequences of blame firsthand, and rely on executives for support and protection during periods of scrutiny. How they interpret an executive’s decision to accept responsibility may therefore carry real consequences for trust, morale, and the effort they are willing to expend on behalf of the executive’s agenda.

We argue that executives’ presentational strategies in the aftermath of crises signal their trustworthiness to civil servants. Effective leadership depends on civil servants accepting and acting upon executive authority, and trust is a central mechanism through which that acceptance is built (Carpenter and Krause, 2015). When an executive shifts blame onto the bureaucracy, civil servants may view the move as self-protective, and the agency that absorbs the criticism may suffer reputational damage that carries psychological and professional costs for its employees. By contrast, when an executive accepts responsibility and shields civil servants from blame, the gesture conveys support in a moment of vulnerability. Civil servants may interpret that choice as evidence of a leader willing to stand with them during failure, a hallmark of transformational leadership. Leaders who accept responsibility for organizational shortcomings model integrity, signal individualized consideration for their subordinates, and demonstrate a commitment to collective purpose, which are core components of transformational leadership associated with greater trust, motivation, and discretionary effort among civil servants (Jakobsen, Andersen and van Luttervelt, 2022; Moynihan, Pandey and Wright, 2013). How executives communicate in crisis can, therefore, shape bureau-

crats' trust and their willingness to invest effort on the executive's behalf long after the immediate episode has passed.

We evaluate these dynamics using a preregistered survey experiment fielded to more than 2,500 state employees across nine US states—the very actors responsible for interpreting executive cues and implementing executive directives. Rather than relying on public opinion or convenience samples, we observe how actual civil servants react to an executive's crisis messaging. Respondents read a stylized scenario concerning a governmental crisis and then encountered various explanations from the governor. The pattern is clear. When the governor accepted responsibility for the failure, civil servants expressed substantially greater trust in the executive's leadership. When the governor shifted blame to the agency, trust fell sharply, and their willingness to carry out her requests declined. These reactions also depended on the agency's objective performance. Executives who claimed blame were rewarded most when the agency had in fact erred, whereas executives who deflected blame were punished most when the agency had acted appropriately. Even brief rhetorical choices, delivered during a crisis, shaped how civil servants evaluated the executive and how much effort they were prepared to invest on her behalf. By measuring these reactions among the officials who actually run state government, the results illuminate an internal channel of executive influence—one that operates inside the administrative state rather than through the public sphere—and reveal an underappreciated role for crisis communication in sustaining administrative capacity.

Our findings demonstrate an underrecognized pathway through which chief executives shape the administrative state. Presentational strategies used during crises do more than manage public impressions; they communicate directly to the civil servants who translate executive priorities into action. How executives explain failure signals whether they can be trusted to support their agencies when the stakes are high. Executives who accept responsibility and shield their subordinates demonstrate reliability and moral leadership, prompting civil servants to invest effort in advancing their goals. Executives who shift blame downward send the opposite message, raising doubts about their character and diminishing the discretionary labor that effective governance depends on. These impressions endure beyond the immediate episode. What civil servants learn about an executive during a period of turbulence shapes their willingness to cooperate in the future, with lasting implications for responsiveness, organizational morale, and the executive's capacity to govern.

By documenting these internal effects, this study broadens the scope of research on crisis communication and reveals how executive rhetoric can strengthen—or erode—the very administrative foundations on which executive power rests.

## Motivating Bureaucratic Effort

Chief executives—such as presidents, prime ministers, governors, and mayors—enter office intent on advancing goals such as electoral success for themselves and their allies, meaningful policy accomplishments, and a durable legacy (Light, 1998 [1982]). While these leaders enjoy considerable authority by virtue of their offices, they still require the cooperation of other political actors to realize their priorities (Neustadt, 1960). Even when issuing unilateral directives—such as executive orders—they depend on personnel in the executive branch, most of whom enjoy civil service protections and cannot be easily removed, to convert those directives into action (Hecl, 1977; Neustadt, 1960; Rudalevige, 2021; Yackee, 2025). Motivating civil servants to act in accordance with an executive’s will is therefore a central challenge in governance. Much of this challenge stems from the fact that bureaucratic effort is difficult for executives to observe or monitor directly, leaving leaders dependent on relational cues to elicit cooperation rather than relying solely on formal authority.

Much scholarship emphasizes the formal tools executives can use to shape bureaucratic behavior. Executives can centralize decision-making, deploy loyal political appointees, and exercise oversight over agency actions (Haeder and Yackee, 2018; Lewis, 2008; Moe, 1985). Yet, as Carpenter and Krause (2015) argues, these institutional levers rarely guarantee compliance. Because the “incomplete contract” between political leaders and civil servants leaves space for discretion, civil servants can withhold information, reinterpret guidance, or slow implementation through additional review (Potter, 2017; Rudalevige, 2021). Because much bureaucratic effort is discretionary and difficult for executives to monitor, leaders rely on relational signals—such as fairness, support, and blame allocation—to elicit cooperation. Thus, formal control alone cannot secure cooperation. Executives must also cultivate what Carpenter and Krause (2015) terms “sanctioned acceptance”: a relational foundation in which civil servants recognize the executive’s legitimate authority and are willing to exercise their discretion in ways that advance her goals (Prethuis, 1960; Simon, 1957).

Chief executives cultivate sanctioned acceptance by building trust with civil servants. They do

so by acknowledging workers' expertise and by offering the kinds of support that help them carry out their duties, including logistical resources and political cover (Carpenter and Krause, 2015, 14). Trust also grows when executives and their appointees bring civil servants into decisionmaking and implementation, create organized opportunities for feedback, and advocate for agencies within the executive branch and to external audiences such as legislators, stakeholders, and the public (Hecl, 1977). These efforts speak directly to the public service motivation that draws many into government. Civil servants want to contribute to policymaking and to meet their civic obligations, and they develop a greater affinity for executives who enable them to pursue those aims (Christensen, Paarlberg and Perry, 2017; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry, 1996). When civil servants sense that elected officials trust and support them, they become more committed to their agencies and more willing to implement the reforms those officials encourage (Yang and Pandey 2009; see also Hameduddin and Fernandez 2019; Macey and Schneider 2008). Civil servants with higher levels of trust in their superiors, including executives' political appointees, sense greater ability to build intellectual capital capacity, an important antecedent to effective policy implementation (Resh, 2015). Compassion from superiors further reduces burnout, strengthens commitment, and increases willingness to undertake demanding tasks that advance agency output (Eldor, 2018).

Executives erode sanctioned acceptance when they criticize or scapegoat the very agencies they rely on. When chief executives engage in bureaucrat bashing, they erode trust and lower civil servants' willingness to exert effort on behalf of executives and their appointees (Garrett et al. 2006; see also Li et al. 2024; Hinterleitner 2026; Schyns and Schilling 2013). Over time, through routine interactions, civil servants develop stable beliefs about how supportive and trustworthy their elected leaders are. Those beliefs shape the extent to which executives can motivate the bureaucracy to carry out their priorities.

Beyond formal control or structural oversight, the relationship between executives and civil servants is sustained through an ongoing social exchange. Public administration scholarship captures this exchange through leader-member relations and the psychological contracts that define mutual obligations (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). When executives show respect and support, they uphold this implicit contract and foster the trust that motivates civil servants to move beyond baseline compliance, embrace innovation, and invest effort in agency goals (Fernandez and Pitts, 2011). Trust in this context is not merely instrumental. It signals fairness, recognition, and a shared sense

of purpose. Acts that reinforce trust — such as accepting responsibility for agency shortcomings — operate as moral leadership, modeling accountability and integrity for the organization (Van Wart, 2013). Leaders who violate the psychological contract through actions like shifting blame downward invite perceptions of betrayal. This weakens commitment and lowers civil servants’ willingness to exert effort on executives’ behalf. By tying executives’ presentational choices to these relationship dynamics, we extend theories of executive political power to the microfoundations of administrative behavior.

### **Governmental Crises as Trust-Building or Trust-Breaking Opportunities**

The central mechanism linking executive leadership to bureaucratic responsiveness becomes even sharper when governments confront failure. Moments of breakdown invite public scrutiny, trigger blame games, and test the relationships executives have cultivated with their agencies. These episodes create the conditions under which presentational choices carry unusual weight, making governmental crises pivotal trust-building or trust-breaking opportunities.

No matter how well prepared or experienced a government is, *governmental crises*—adverse outcomes stemming from government action or inaction and attracting public attention—inevitably arise (Miller and Reeves, 2022). Such crises range from failures to prevent fraud, to leaks of sensitive information, to the mismanagement of natural disasters. When they occur, political actors, the media, and the public quickly search for someone to blame, and elected executives are frequent targets. Formally, chief executives hold ultimate responsibility for the conduct of government (Bovens, 2007, 458). Socialization reinforces this formal role: the public routinely expects executives to be responsible for a wide set of outcomes (Clifford et al., 2024). Presidents, for example, are expected to do “something about everything” (Neustadt, 1960, 7), and the accumulation of statutory responsibilities fuels the mythic expectation that they can meet those demands (Lowi, 1985, 151). Governors face similar expectations (Kousser and Phillips, 2012, 251), and executives across all levels are judged for broad agency performance (Ansolabehere, Gerber and Snyder, 2002, 315). These formal responsibilities and socialized expectations place executives at the center of the blame games that follow crises (Boin, McConnell and T’Hart, 2008; Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986).

Because elected executives derive much of their power and influence from the reputations they cultivate among other political elites, the media, and the public (Neustadt, 1960), blame games are

dangerous circumstances that can tarnish their reputations if they are ultimately held responsible for the underlying governmental crisis (Boin, McConnell and T'Hart, 2008; Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017; Hood, 2011; Resodihardjo, 2020). Once a blame game is active and an elected executive is a target, they often turn to presentational strategies to try to navigate the crisis and preserve their reputation (Hood, 2011). These strategies typically involve the executive's choice to accept or deflect blame for the crisis. On the one hand, if an executive can avoid blame, they may expect to escape association with the adverse outcome and the negative perceptions that accompany it. However, if they accept blame, they could expect to improve perceptions of their leadership valence by presenting themselves as willing to take responsibility when adverse outcomes occur (Miller and Reeves, 2022).

While academic studies of the implications of presentational strategies typically focus on how they shape perceptions of the public, the media, other elected officials, or political parties (e.g., Boin et al., 2010; Brändström, Kuipers and Daléus, 2008; Hood et al., 2009; Miller and Reeves, 2022; Moynihan, 2012), we focus on the effects of these strategies on an underappreciated audience—the civil servants who are formally responsible to those executives and are often also implicated in the governmental crisis. Critically, because civil servants, through their role of implementing government policy on behalf of the executive, are often more proximate to the crisis, they are often plausible targets for blame, and in crafting their presentational strategies executives often consider the role of the civil servants who are formally responsible to them (Hinterleitner, 2026). Additionally, because civil servants lack direct connections to the electorate and are formally subordinate to the executive, they lack independent channels through which to offer their own presentational strategies when crises strike; rather, they rely on the executive's account of their culpability to shape public perceptions of their agencies (Hinterleitner, 2026; Hood, 2011). Civil servants, therefore, monitor executive messaging closely, as these signals reveal whether they can expect political support or scapegoating in the aftermath of failures—information that directly affects their professional standing and organizational reputation. Thus, how executives choose to incorporate the bureaucracy into their presentational strategies can help civil servants learn about the trustworthiness of the managers of the executive branch, which can then impact their future orientation towards those executives.

One straightforward presentational strategy available to elected executives is to deflect blame for

the governmental crisis to civil servants. In doing so, executives utilize civil servants as “lightning rods” who absorb blame while allowing executives to preserve their own reputations (Ellis, 1994). While executives may anticipate that blaming civil servants will shield them from the wrath of other political figures, the media, and the public, this strategy risks damaging the trust they have with their civil servants such that their ability to manage the executive branch will suffer. First, because civil servants fiercely value their agencies’ reputations, as they help them gain discretion in carrying out their missions, cultivate legitimacy in the eyes of other political actors and the public, and bolster their own satisfaction with their jobs (Carpenter, 2001; Moynihan, 2012; Pedersen et al., 2025), they should react negatively to acts that undercut their agencies’ reputations and perceive an executive who sacrifices them to protect herself as selfish and untrustworthy (Hinterleitner, 2026). Second, because blame exacts psychic and physical costs on those who incur it (Hastorf, Schneider and Polefka, 1970; Zuckerman, 1979), civil servants to whom executives deflect blame are likely to resent executives who heap those costs upon them and encourage bureaucrat bashing that diminishes morale (Garrett et al., 2006; Jahan and Shahan, 2012; Lotta, Tavares and Story, 2024; Hinterleitner, 2026). Thus, we expect that when elected executives deflect blame to civil servants, civil servants will view them as less trustworthy and be less willing to exert effort on their behalf.

While deflecting blame to others is a prominent presentational strategy, it is not the only option elected executives implicated in a blame game have. Rather than trying to escape responsibility, executives can instead embrace the saying immortalized by a placard US President Harry S Truman kept on his desk in the Oval Office—“the buck stops here”—and accept blame for a crisis. While executives and commentators often expect this to hurt their reputations (but see Miller and Reeves, 2022), not only can it make executives look like better leaders, but it can also provide civil servants with signals about their trustworthiness—especially if in claiming blame the executive absorbs blame *away* from the bureaucracy. When executives claim blame, they not only risk making themselves politically vulnerable, but they also take on the personal psychic and physical costs involved with taking responsibility for adverse outcomes. These self-sacrifices can bolster executives’ reputations among civil servants as leaders who are worthy of their trust because they will stand by their subordinates, even when things go wrong (Busuioc and Lodge, 2016, 2017; Hood, 2011; Thompson, 1980). Further, executives’ willingness to protect civil servants from blame and the trust this cultivates may facilitate transformational leadership by inspiring them to follow the executives’

example, redouble their efforts on behalf of their agencies' mission, and embrace responsibility for their agencies' successes and failures (Jakobsen, Andersen and van Luttervelt, 2022; Moynihan, Pandey and Wright, 2013; Oberfield, 2014). Thus, we expect that when elected executives employ presentational strategies that claim blame for themselves, civil servants will view those executives as more trustworthy and be more willing to exert effort on their behalf.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Role of Culpability in Civil Servants' Reactions to Executives' Presentational Strategies**

Blame games and the presentational strategies elected executives employ to navigate them do not occur in vacuums; rather, the circumstances surrounding a governmental crisis can affect how external audiences receive those presentational strategies. One consideration that can condition the effect of the executive's presentational strategy on civil servants' perceptions of her is the objective responsibility of the executive and the bureaucracy for the crisis. When trying to make sense of events, civil servants, like all individuals, have both directional and accuracy goals that encourage them to reach conclusions that accord with their worldview and are "correct," respectively (Bolsen and Palm, 2019; Kunda, 1990). In the context of attributing responsibility after a governmental crisis, while civil servants have directional motivations to evade blame, they also face competing accuracy motivations to discern how blame *should* be allocated. Given their public service motivation, civil servants seek out information about their performance, even if it is negative, in order to make sure their agencies are fulfilling their missions and they are making a positive impact on society (Christensen, Paarlberg and Perry, 2017; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry, 1996; Van der Voet, 2023). Further, Garrett et al. (2006) share that while civil servants dislike bureaucrat bashing from outside audiences, they expend effort to discern whether the bashing they incur is justified in each circumstance. Given their proximity to the crisis, civil servants are likely to have some information that helps them form an impression of how blameworthy they truly are—even if those impressions

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<sup>4</sup>While we present blame deflecting and blame claiming as orthogonal strategies, executives can and often do employ "mixed" strategies; for instance, the executive may opt to claim some of the blame but also allocate some to a bureaucratic agency. Because this strategy of sharing blame combines the positive reputational effects of the executive demonstrating willingness to support her subordinates with the negative effects of diminishing the agency's reputation and making civil servants incur the psychic and physical costs of blame, we also pre-registered that when executives share blame with civil servants, their trust in those executives and willingness to exert effort on their behalf will be higher than when the executives deflect all of the blame to them, but lower than when the executives claimed all of the blame.

reflect poorly on themselves (Schlenker et al., 1994).

How well an elected executive's allocation of blame in their presentational strategy corresponds with civil servants' impression of their own blameworthiness likely conditions how civil servants react to the executive's words. Suppose first that the crisis was in fact due to the civil servants' action or inaction such that they deserve blame. If the executive attributes blame to civil servants for the crisis, civil servants will have a natural adverse reaction to receiving blame but recognize that they are responsible for the outcome, thus dampening the negative effects of the executive blaming them on their perceptions of her (Markman and Tetlock, 2000; Schlenker et al., 1994). If instead the executive shields civil servants from blame they rightly deserve by claiming it for herself, she signals to them that she is a supportive leader, prompting them to place more trust in her and to be more willing to exert effort on her behalf (Busuioac and Lodge, 2016, 2017; Hood, 2011; Thompson, 1980).

Now suppose that the bureaucracy is not primarily responsible for the crisis, but that some other person, organization, or act of God prompted the adverse outcome. If the executive, as the unitary figure with ultimate responsibility for the conduct of government, claims the blame for the crisis, she makes a functionally accurate allocation of blame that signals her type as a trustworthy leader while shielding civil servants from underserved criticism. However, were the executive to deflect blame to the bureaucracy, civil servants would incur not only reputational damage to their agencies and psychic and physical costs associated with blame, but also the indignity and resentment of being made to shoulder responsibility for a crisis that was not their doing (Schlenker et al., 1994).

Thus, we expect that the effect of executives' presentational strategies that address blame for the crisis on civil servants' perceptions of those executives is conditioned by the correspondence of the civil servants' true degree of blameworthiness and the degree of blame the executive attributes to them. Specifically, the effect of blame claiming on civil servants' trust in and willingness to work on behalf of an executive is larger when the civil servants are culpable for the crisis, as the executive shields them from blame they know they deserve, thus selflessly sparing them the negative reputational and personal costs associated with blame. Further, the effect of blame deflecting is larger when civil servants are not responsible for the crisis, as the executive's deflection not only prompts civil servants to incur the negative consequences of blame, but does so when their performance does not warrant it; consequently, civil servants perceive the executive does not value

their service and expertise, further eroding their trust in and willingness to exert effort for her.<sup>5</sup>

## Experimental Evidence from Civil Servants in the US States

Studying how individual civil servants respond to the words and actions of elected executives presents two key challenges. First, most civil servants work outside public view and rarely advertise their opinions about internal deliberations or their political principles, making it difficult to observe their responses. If a governor criticizes one of their state agencies, the ways that criticism influences civil servants' attitudes toward the governor and their subsequent behavior would likely remain hidden.

Second, even if researchers could observe these responses across many cases, it would be difficult to isolate the causal effect of any given presentational strategy. Suppose researchers could observe civil servants' responses to mayors' comments during governmental crises across American cities, and civil servants expressed more favorable views toward mayors who took responsibility rather than those who blamed subordinates. While this pattern might suggest that mayors' rhetoric causally affects civil servants' perceptions, alternative explanations would be difficult to rule out. Other factors related to mayors' decisions to accept blame, such as crisis severity or pre-existing relationships with civil servants, could instead explain the differences in attitudes.

To address these research design challenges, we utilize an original survey experiment of civil servants in 9 US states. By fielding a survey, we can directly collect information about civil servants' perceptions of political principals that are typically not expressed publicly. Within the survey, we include an experiment that systematically varies an elected executive's rhetoric—whether they accept blame for a governmental crisis or deflect it to civil servants—while holding other dimensions constant across respondents. This allows us to attribute any observed differences in civil servants' perceptions of the featured executive to the executive's choice of presentational strategy.

We embedded our pre-registered survey experiment in a survey of US state civil servants fielded between May 31 and June 26, 2024.<sup>6</sup> The sampling frame for this survey contained all state

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<sup>5</sup>Our pre-registration document stated that we would examine how the objective blameworthiness of the civil servant's agency conditions the effects of elected executives' presentational strategies, but we did not provide explicit statements about *how* these conditional effects would manifest. Thus, this set of expectations is exploratory.

<sup>6</sup>Our pre-analysis plan is available at the Open Science Framework: [https://osf.io/tpjmw/?view\\_only=4ab114ce482a4d2a8fa3e963980f40f0](https://osf.io/tpjmw/?view_only=4ab114ce482a4d2a8fa3e963980f40f0). The survey in which the experiment was embedded was approved by the institutional review board at [REDACTED].

government employees whose email addresses were posted publicly in the directories of the following nine states: Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, and Vermont.<sup>7</sup> Of the 219,103 persons with valid email addresses in the sampling frame, 2,540 completed the survey module in which our experiment was embedded, yielding a response rate of 1.2% ( $\frac{2,540}{219,103}$ ).<sup>8</sup>

In the survey, respondents were asked to imagine working for a transportation department in another state. Then, respondents were presented with a short vignette describing a recent major snowstorm that caused significant traffic delays and several car accidents on the state’s roadways, prompting legislators, journalists, and the public to criticize the state’s handling of the storm.<sup>9</sup> Next, respondents saw an excerpt from a press conference the governor held in which the governor addressed the criticism surrounding the traffic problems prompted by the snowstorm and pledged to review how the state responds to snowstorms to try to minimize similar problems in the future.

Two facets of the survey experiment were independently randomized across respondents. The first varied how the governor allocated blame for the state’s handling of the snowstorm. Respondents in the control group read that the governor told reporters it was “too early to place blame for why the state’s roadways were in such poor condition.” In the three treatment conditions, respondents

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<sup>7</sup>At the time we surveyed data availability in late 2021, 25 states publicly provided contact information for their state employees. We selected these 9 states because they were both feasible to collect given the structure of their employee directories and because they provide variation on important political, socioeconomic, and cultural dimensions that may inform the preferences and behaviors of civil servants, such as the states’ geographic location and size, the partisan affiliation of the states’ governors and legislative majorities, and the relative size of different racial and ethnic groups among the states’ populations. See Supplemental Information Section B.1 for more information on the selection of states and collection of contact information.

<sup>8</sup>Please see Supplemental Information Section B.3 for information about the descriptive characteristics of our respondents. While our response rate is lower than that observed with other recently published survey experiments with American elite samples (Furnas and LaPira, 2024; Miller, 2022), it is comparable to response rates for surveys of American mass public samples (e.g., “Voters Broadly Positive About How Elections Were Conducted, in Sharp Contrast to 2020.” *Pew Research Center*, December 4, 2024, [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/12/PP\\_2024.12.3\\_election-2024\\_REPORT.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/12/PP_2024.12.3_election-2024_REPORT.pdf)) and the size of our sampling frame ensured that we would obtain enough respondents to conduct well-powered analyses. We suspect our relatively low response rate is a consequence of state government employees having been socialized by information technology professionals to be skeptical of emails from unfamiliar senders; we detail some of our evidence for this belief in Supplemental Information Section A.

<sup>9</sup>In designing our vignette, we sought to frame a governmental crisis that civil servants in any state could plausibly imagine confronting. Although snowstorms occur more often in some regions than others, nearly every US state experiences snowfall at least once a year (Dolce, Chris. “All 50 States Have Seen Snow This Winter and Some Southern Cities Have Topped Northern Ones.” *The Weather Channel*, January 23, 2025, <https://weather.com/storms/winter/news/2025-01-22-50-states-snowfall-winter-southern-cities-top-northern-cities>). States that experience snow less frequently often face greater challenges in managing storms, making the risk of governmental failure in this context salient even for civil servants in temperate climates such as Florida. For instance, although a rare 2014 snowstorm in Georgia produced fewer than three inches of snow, it nevertheless paralyzed the state’s roadways and drew widespread criticism (Botelho, Greg and Tom Watkins. “Georgia officials under fire for actions before, during, after snow.” *CNN*, January 30, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/01/30/us/winter-weather/index.html>).

read that the governor employed one of three presentational strategies to attribute responsibility. In the *Blame Claim* condition, the governor declared, “I am ultimately responsible for the management of state roadways, and I accept blame for this situation.” In the *Blame Deflection* condition, the governor argues that, “the state’s department of transportation is ultimately responsible for the management of state roadways, and they are to blame for this situation.” Beyond strict blame claiming and blame deflecting, we also include a third treatment condition in which the governor *shares* blame with the agency. In doing so, we acknowledge that executives sometimes blend these strategies in an attempt to reap the benefits of both (Hood, 2011). In this *Blame Share* condition, the governor states that, “I share responsibility with the state’s department of transportation for the management of state roadways, and I accept some of the blame for this situation.” These statements vary in the degree to which the governor accepted or redirected blame to the state’s transportation department.

Second, we randomized the information respondents learned about the transportation department’s preparedness. In the control condition, the vignette did not report whether the department anticipated the storm’s magnitude or deployed sufficient resources, leaving its preparedness ambiguous. In the *Prepared* condition, respondents read that the department “correctly assessed the severity of the storm and deployed the appropriate number of crews to treat and clear the roads.” In the *Underprepared* condition, they read that the department “underestimated the severity of the storm and deployed fewer crews to treat and clear the roads than was necessary.” This element of the design varied the extent to which the department was objectively blameworthy.

After reading the vignette, we present respondents with four outcome questions that capture key dimensions of the executive–civil servant relationship. Because our theory holds that presentational strategies shape both civil servants’ trust in the executive and their willingness to exert discretionary effort, we measure outcomes that reflect these two components of sanctioned acceptance.

The first two questions asked respondents to rate, on a five-point scale, the extent to which they trusted the governor to defend their department against warranted and unwarranted criticism. These items capture whether civil servants believe the governor will provide political cover, a critical form of support when organizations encounter public scrutiny. Next, respondents were asked, again on a five-point scale, how much effort they expect the governor to invest in supporting their department’s mission and activities. This item measures perceptions of administrative support—the

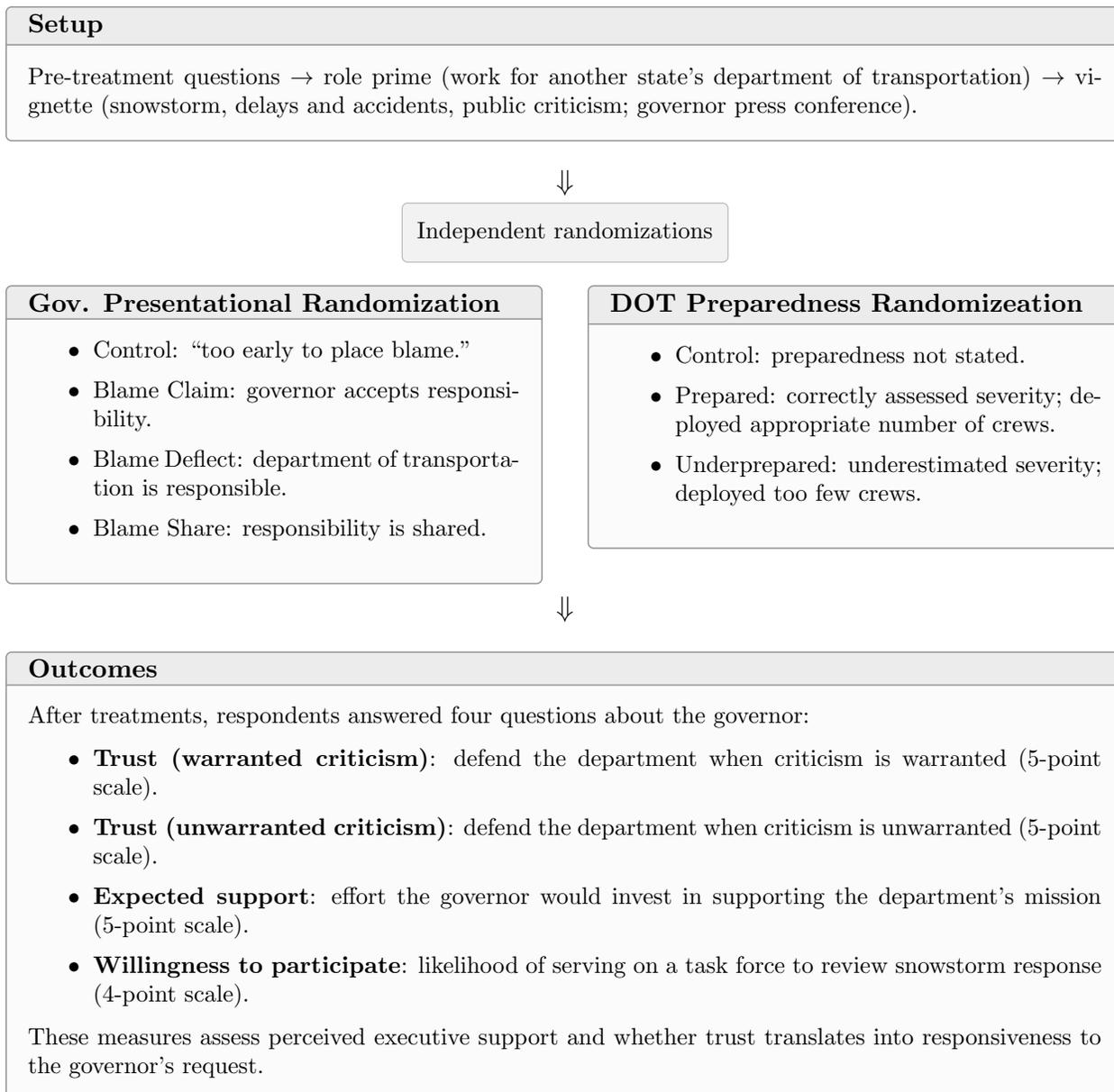


Figure 1: Schematic of Experimental Randomization and Outcomes

governor’s willingness to allocate time, attention, and resources to support the agency’s success (Bednar and Lewis, 2024). Taken together, these three questions assess respondents’ appraisal of whether the governor is a reliable partner who will protect and advance the department’s work, a core mechanism through which trust is built in the executive branch.

Finally, to gauge the behavioral implications of these perceptions, respondents were asked to imagine that the governor requested their participation on a task force to review the state’s snow-storm response plans, and to indicate on a four-point scale how likely they would be to serve. This measure captures civil servants’ readiness to undertake discretionary labor on behalf of the executive—a direct test of our expectation that trust in the governor shapes willingness to cooperate. In short, the first three outcomes measure perceived trustworthiness and support, while the final outcome measures the behavioral responsiveness that such trust should produce. Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram of our survey experiment.

## Results

Across our outcomes, a consistent pattern emerges: how an elected executive — here, a governor — explains failure meaningfully shapes how civil servants evaluate the executive and how willing they are to act on the executive’s behalf. To preview our findings, governors who accepted responsibility for the crisis generated higher levels of trust in their leadership, stronger expectations of support for the agency’s mission, and greater willingness among civil servants to undertake discretionary work. By contrast, when governors deflected blame onto the agency, civil servants reported markedly lower trust and reduced readiness to invest effort. Blame sharing produced intermediate responses, generally closer to blame claiming than to blame deflection. These effects are not uniform, however; they depend on the agency’s objective performance. Civil servants responded most favorably to blame claiming when the department was at fault, and most negatively to blame deflecting when the department had performed well. Taken together, the results show that brief rhetorical choices made in the midst of a crisis can alter both civil servants’ evaluations of the executive and their willingness to help her govern.

We begin by presenting the estimated effects of each presentational strategy—*Blame Claim*, *Blame Deflect*, and *Blame Share*—on the four outcome measures, irrespective of the agency’s

objective performance, in Figure 2. All effects are expressed relative to the control condition, in which the governor stated that it was too early to assign blame. Higher values indicate more favorable views of the governor.

First, focusing on respondents' trust that the governor would defend their department from either unwarranted (Figure 2, row 1) or warranted (Figure 2, row 2) criticism, a similar pattern appears across both outcomes. Respondents in the *Blame Claim* condition (circles) report higher levels of trust compared to the control group. Those in the *Blame Deflect* condition (squares) report the opposite. Those in the *Blame Share* condition (triangles) show a modestly more positive assessment than the control group, and although these differences are generally small and not statistically distinguishable from those in the control group, though they are distinguishable from the sharply negative reactions observed when the governor deflects blame.

The magnitudes reinforce this pattern. For unwarranted criticism, respondents in the *Blame Claim* condition rate their trust 0.17 points higher on the five-point scale than respondents in the control condition. Those in the *Blame Deflect* condition rate their trust 0.79 points lower. The nearly one-point difference separating *Blame Claim* and *Blame Deflect* represents a meaningful shift in perceptions of the governor's willingness to defend the agency. Results for warranted criticism are comparable: *Blame Claim* increases trust by 0.23 points relative to control, whereas *Blame Deflect* decreases trust by 0.59 points.

These findings demonstrate that civil servants use executives' presentational strategies as cues about whether leaders can be trusted to support the agency during public scrutiny. Executives who accept responsibility—and thereby shield agencies from reputational, psychic, and physical costs—are rewarded with greater trust. Executives who redirect those costs downward are penalized. In this way, even brief responses to a crisis can shift the relational foundation that underpins bureaucratic cooperation.

We observe a similar pattern when examining respondents' expectations that the governor would invest effort in supporting the department's mission and activities. Respondents assigned to the *Blame Claim* condition report slightly higher expectations of gubernatorial support, rating the governor 0.16 points higher on the five-point scale than those in the control group. By contrast, those exposed to *Blame Deflect* anticipate meaningfully less support, rating the governor 0.45 points lower. Expectations in the *Blame Share* condition remain substantively small and statistically

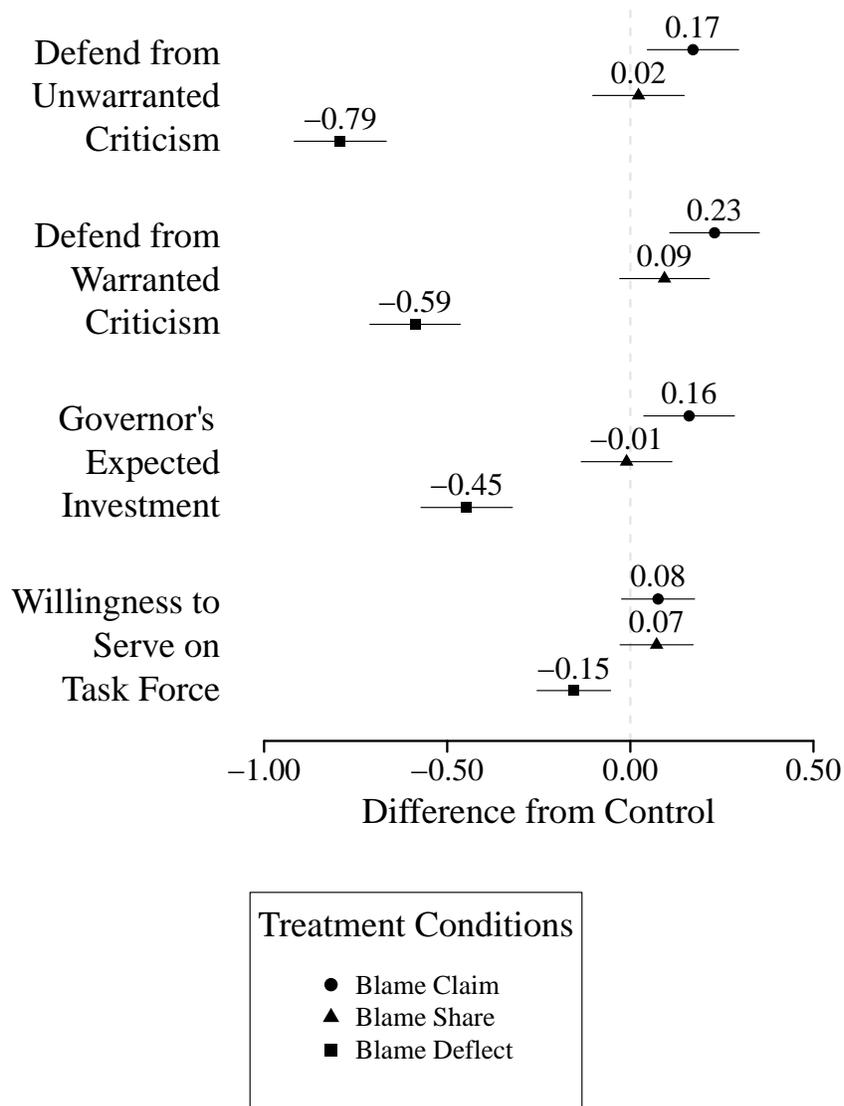


Figure 2: **Effects of Gubernatorial Presentational Strategy on Civil Servants' Perceptions of the Governor.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of the Blame Claim (circles), Blame Share (triangles), and Blame Deflect (squares) conditions. Outcomes concerning respondents' expectations of the governor's willingness to defend their department from unwarranted or warranted criticism and to invest in their department are measured using five-point scales, while the outcome concerning respondents' willingness to serve on a task force to review the governmental failure is measured using a four-point scale. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

indistinguishable from the control condition, though they are distinguishably more positive than those in the *Blame Deflect* condition.

A related pattern emerges for respondents' willingness to undertake discretionary work on the governor's behalf. When asked whether they would serve on a task force to review the state's

snowstorm response, respondents in the *Blame Deflect* condition report modestly lower willingness to participate—0.15 points lower on the four-point scale—relative to the control group. We find no evidence that exposure to *Blame Claim* or *Blame Share* meaningfully increases or decreases willingness to serve relative to those in the control group, but the willingness of respondents in both of these treatment groups to serve on the task for is distinguishably higher than those in the *Blame Deflect* condition.

These results again point to the relational logic that underlies sanctioned acceptance. Civil servants form expectations about the executive’s supportiveness from how she explains failure. Executives who accept responsibility signal that they value bureaucratic expertise and are willing to absorb political costs on behalf of the agency; executives who redirect those costs downward signal the opposite. Civil servants respond accordingly, adjusting both their expectations of administrative support and their readiness to invest discretionary effort in the executive’s priorities.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that civil servants form meaningful inferences about executive leadership from the way governors narrate failure. The patterns here suggest that presentational strategies shape the relational foundations on which administrative cooperation rests. When executives accept responsibility, they signal that they are willing to absorb political costs to protect the agency’s standing, acknowledge bureaucratic expertise, and act as partners rather than antagonists. Civil servants respond to these cues by expecting greater administrative support and by remaining open to requests for additional work. Conversely, blame deflection communicates not only a lack of support but also a willingness to expose the agency and its employees to reputational harm. Civil servants take that signal seriously. Lower expectations of gubernatorial investment and reduced willingness to undertake discretionary labor indicate a withdrawal from the cooperative behaviors on which executive governance often relies. In short, the way executives talk in moments of crisis reverberates beyond the immediate episode: it reshapes the motivational landscape within agencies, alters how civil servants understand their obligations to elected leaders, and ultimately affects the executive’s ability to marshal the administrative state toward her priorities.

To this point, our analyses have examined the effect of the governor’s presentational strategy on civil servants’ perceptions and willingness to act without considering other contextual factors. Yet our theory also holds that civil servants bring their own information to bear when interpreting the governor’s explanation of failure. Civil servants are often well-positioned to assess how blameworthy

their agency is for the crisis at hand, and they are likely to compare the governor’s attribution of responsibility to their own understanding of what happened. When the governor’s message aligns with civil servants’ internal assessments or presents their agency in a more favorable light than the facts suggest, it should reinforce perceptions of fairness and support; however when it conflicts with those assessments in ways that reflect poorly on the agency, it should raise doubts about the governor’s trustworthiness. The effects of presentational strategies should therefore depend on the agency’s objective performance.

Figure 3 presents these conditional effects by showing the estimated impact of the *Blame Claim* (left panel), *Blame Share* (center panel), and *Blame Deflect* (right panel) treatments among respondents told that their department was *Underprepared* (circles), *Prepared* (squares), or not provided with information about preparedness (*Control*; triangles). Each estimate is relative to respondents in the corresponding preparedness condition who received no presentational statement from the governor. For example, the top estimate in the left panel compares respondents who were told the department was underprepared and saw a blame-claiming message to respondents who were told the department was underprepared but saw no explanation of blame.

Focusing first on blame claiming, the left panel shows that its effects are positive across all preparedness conditions but are largest when the department was described as underprepared. Respondents who read that the governor accepted responsibility and that their department was underprepared rated the governor’s expected effort 0.33 points higher than those in the corresponding control condition. When the department was described as adequately prepared, the effect of blame claiming is smaller—an increase of 0.09 points.<sup>10</sup> These results suggest that blame claiming particularly effective when it shields civil servants from blame they know they deserve. In such cases, the governor’s acceptance of responsibility conveys a willingness to absorb political costs on behalf of the agency, signaling support that can strengthen trust and reinforce the relational foundations of transformational leadership.

Next, turning to blame sharing in the center panel, we again observe that civil servants respond most favorably when the department was described as underprepared. Blame sharing seldom produces significant improvements relative to saying nothing about blame, yet when the governor

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<sup>10</sup>Across outcomes, the effect of blame claiming when the department was underprepared is not statistically distinguishable from the effect when the department was adequately prepared or when preparedness was unspecified. The point estimates, however, follow the theoretically expected ordering.

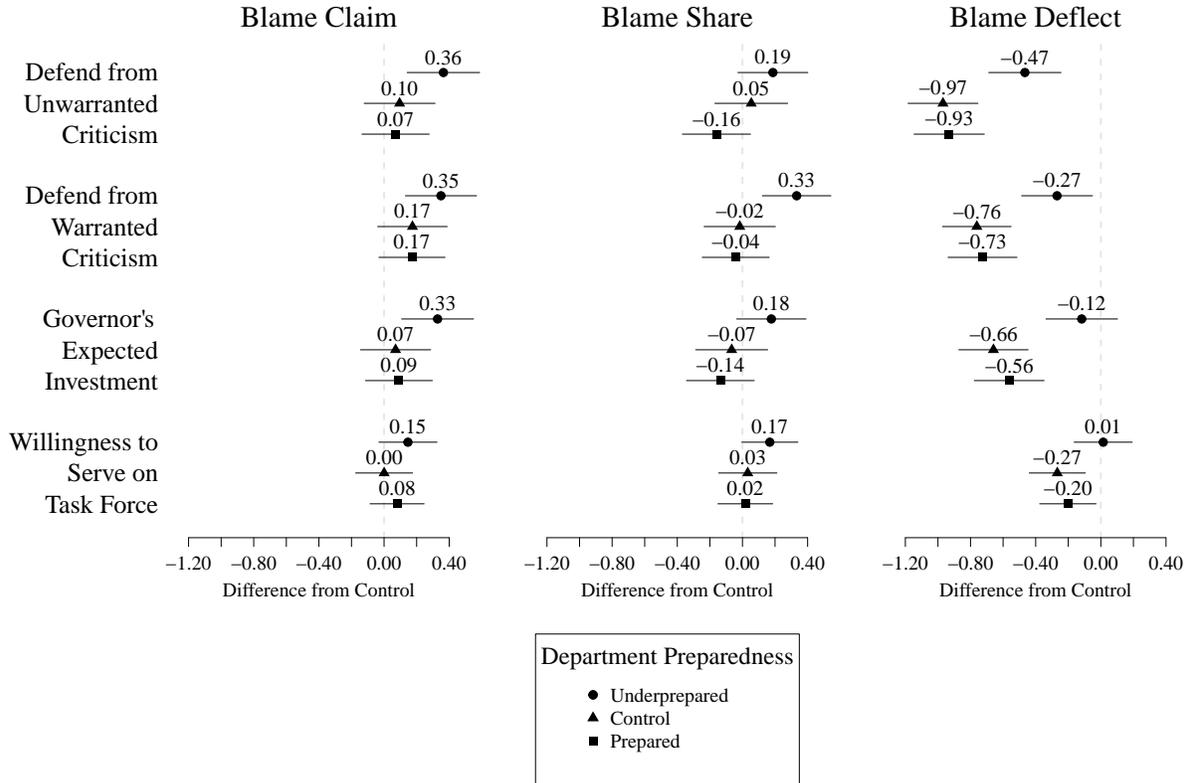


Figure 3: **Effects of Gubernatorial Presentational Strategy on Civil Servants' Perceptions of the Governor, Conditioned by Department Preparedness.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of the Underprepared (circles), control (triangles), and Prepared (squares) conditions among respondents assigned to the *Blame Claim* (left panel), *Blame Share* (center panel), and *Blame Deflect* (right panel) conditions. In each panel, the baseline to which treatment effects reference is respondents for whom the governor did not address blame for the state's handling of the snowstorm and the department's level of preparedness was set to the value indicated by the symbol with which the point estimate is plotted. Outcomes concerning respondents' expectations of the governor's willingness to defend their department from unwarranted or warranted criticism and to invest in their department are measured using five-point scales, while the outcome concerning respondents' willingness to serve on a task force to review the governmental failure is measured using a four-point scale. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

partially absorbs responsibility for a failure that civil servants know they contributed to, respondents react more positively than when the department was said to be adequately prepared or when preparedness was unspecified. The only case in which blame sharing is statistically distinguishable from the control condition is trust that the governor will defend the department from warranted criticism. Still, the pattern of point estimates—often significantly different across preparedness conditions—suggests that civil servants reward even partial protection when they believe blame is justified. For instance, among respondents told the department was underprepared, the positive estimate for trust against unwarranted criticism (0.19) is statistically distinct from the negative es-

timate among respondents told the department was adequately prepared and assigned to the *Blame Share* condition.<sup>11</sup> In short, while blame sharing rarely benefits executives outright, it produces more favorable assessments when it shields civil servants who recognize their own culpability. In this sense, blame sharing functions as a muted form of blame claiming: by offering civil servants even partial cover from deserved blame, executives improve their standing within government.

Finally, blame deflection in the right panel produces the clearest and most consistent pattern of negative results. Across preparedness conditions and outcome measures, shifting blame onto the agency reduces trust in the governor and lowers expectations of administrative support. Yet the magnitude of these effects depends sharply on whether civil servants believe they are at fault. Respondents who told their department was underprepared reacted negatively to blame deflection, but respondents who told their department was adequately prepared reacted far more harshly. For instance, respondents in the *Blame Deflect* condition told their department was underprepared were 0.47 units (on a five-point scale) less trusting that the governor would defend the department from unwarranted criticism, whereas the corresponding estimate among those told the department was adequately prepared was  $-0.93$ . A similar pattern appears for expectations of the governor's investment in the department: the negative effect is nearly five times larger when the department is adequately prepared (a decrease of 0.56 points) than when it is underprepared (a decrease of 0.12 points).<sup>12</sup> These results underscore that civil servants consistently punish executives who deflect blame, but they respond most severely when they perceive the blame to be undeserved. In such cases, blame deflection imposes reputational, psychological, and physical costs on civil servants that they believe they did not cause, signaling that the governor is unwilling to protect the agency and is prepared to sacrifice subordinates to safeguard her own standing.

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<sup>11</sup>Among those assigned to the *Blame Share* condition, the treatment effect associated with *Underprepared* is distinguishable from the treatment effect associated with *Prepared* for the following outcome variables: Defend from Unwarranted Criticism, Defend from Warranted Criticism, and Governor's Expected Investment. Additionally, the treatment effect associated with *Underprepared* is distinguishable from the treatment effect associated with the control condition for department preparedness for the following outcome variables: Defend from Warranted Criticism.

<sup>12</sup>The effect of blame deflecting relative to the governor making no comment on blame allocation among respondents told the department was underprepared is distinguishably smaller at the 95 percent confidence level than the analogous effects among respondents told the department was adequately prepared or given no information about preparedness in all cases except for the comparison between respondents told the department was underprepared and those told the department was prepared; for this comparison, the difference in treatment effects ( $0.01 - -0.20 = 0.21$ ) is only distinguishable at the 90 percent confidence level.

## Conclusion

When chief executives speak, their statements do more than address the public. They also reach other attentive audiences such as Congress, the media, and, as we show here, the bureaucracy. Civil servants read these messages to learn more about an executive's leadership approach. When an executive accepts responsibility for a crisis that implicates an agency, she shields employees from the reputational and psychological costs of blame and signals that she is willing to stand with them when circumstances turn difficult. Civil servants interpret this choice as a sign of trustworthiness and respond with a greater willingness to invest effort on the executive's behalf. When an executive instead shifts responsibility to the agency, civil servants see the move as self-protective, grow less trusting, and withhold the discretionary effort that effective governance often requires. Machiavelli advised rulers to let others absorb blame while keeping praise for themselves (1998 [1532], 75), but our findings show that executives who hope to cultivate bureaucratic trust and build administrative capacity may benefit from claiming responsibility when trouble arises.

Before treating blame claiming as a reliable route to stronger bureaucratic support, executives should recognize that its effects depend on context. Civil servants develop views of their leaders over many encounters, not a single crisis, and their reactions will reflect prior attitudes toward the executive, their ties to political appointees, and what they have seen from the executive in earlier moments of crises. Choosing not to shift blame may well improve how culpable civil servants assess an executive, but shielding civil servants from blame when it is warranted can invite moral hazard by signaling that errors will be absorbed rather than examined or sanctioned. Executives thus confront a basic managerial tension: they need to build trust with civil servants while also ensuring that those civil servants remain accountable for the outcomes they produce. Our experiment also cannot speak to how employees in other agencies interpret an executive's decision to claim or deflect blame. Even if they are not directly implicated, they may read the executive's treatment of one agency as indicative of how they would be treated under similar conditions, though the absence of direct exposure may mute their reactions. The agency's reputation will also shape these judgments. Shielding an agency known for persistent shortcomings, for instance, may weaken the executive's standing among observers elsewhere in the bureaucracy. These contextual features deserve further attention, since they likely condition how presentational strategies shape the perceptions and

behavior of those responsible for carrying out an executive's agenda.

We also highlight the potential for elected executives to use their own messaging to cultivate trust with the bureaucracy, and we encourage further research on this dynamic. For instance, future work could examine how executives' credit claiming and sharing for positive outcomes affect bureaucratic trust. Just as executives can claim or deflect blame, so too can they claim and share credit. If executives credit civil servants for political wins, they may trust their executive more. But if executives fail to recognize their subordinates, civil servants may perceive them as unreliable or untrustworthy managers.

Agencies also confront decisions that predictably generate criticism from legislators, interest groups, and other observers. In these moments, executives can strengthen their standing with civil servants by stepping forward and accepting responsibility, thereby absorbing the controversy and limiting the costs borne by the agency. Direct communication offers another channel through which executives can cultivate trust. Whether through formal memoranda, routine newsletters, or informal messages from agency leaders, executives who invite feedback and act on it signal that bureaucratic expertise matters. When employees see their suggestions reflected in policies and practices, they are more inclined to view the executive as a credible and supportive leader. In an environment where civil servants often face pressure from many sides, even small steps that reinforce trust and morale through careful communication can help sustain the administrative capacity on which effective governance relies.

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# Supplemental Information

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## A Preregistration

We preregistered our experimental design through the Open Science Framework on May 18, 2024 ([https://osf.io/tpjmw/?view\\_only=4ab114ce482a4d2a8fa3e963980f40f0](https://osf.io/tpjmw/?view_only=4ab114ce482a4d2a8fa3e963980f40f0)). In fielding the survey containing the experiment, we made one deviation from our preregistered design concerning how many individuals in the sampling frame were solicited to participate in the survey. We describe this deviation and the rationale behind it here.

In our preregistration, we planned to randomly sample 25% of the 253,344 email addresses we obtained from state employee directories. We chose this approach to balance both power considerations for all of the modules on the survey while not overburdening public employees.<sup>1</sup> The size of our random sample anticipated a response rate of between 5% and 10%, as reported in recent studies utilizing survey experiments with other elite populations (e.g., Furnas and LaPira 2024; Miller 2022), which would have yielded us approximately 2,600 to 5,200 responses. However, 24 hours after distributing email invitations to the random sample, we observed a response rate of lower than 1%, which prompted concern that we would not obtain enough responses to conduct sufficiently powered analyses.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, we decided to send email invitations to all state government employees for which we collected email addresses.

## B Experimental Protocol

### B.1 Sampling Procedure

The sampling frame for the survey in which the Chevron priming experiment was embedded was all state government employees in the following nine states whose email addresses were posted publicly in the employee directories of those states: Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, and Vermont. In the first half of 2023, one of the authors and student research assistants collected the emails from the directories of these states and formatted them into comma-separated files.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Starting with the initial sample of 253,344 emails across the nine states, we considered two factors that would inform our expected response rate: 1) the expected turnover of state employees between the time the emails were collected in 2023 and the survey was fielded in 2024 and 2) observed response rates in other recent samples of political elites. First, based on reported turnover rates of states in our sample, we expected approximately 16% of employees in our sample to no longer be employed by their state rendering their email address invalid. Second, examining recent survey experiments of political elites, such as congressional staff and federal lobbyists, we anticipated a response rate of between 5% and 10% (e.g., Furnas and LaPira 2024; Miller 2022).

<sup>2</sup>While it is difficult to understand systematic reasons for non-response, anecdotally we believe state government employees are not as responsive as other recently studied elite populations because they have been trained to be cautious when opening and interacting with emails sent from unfamiliar sources. Many potential respondents emailed the author who facilitated survey distribution asking for confirmation and/or evidence that the survey invitation was legitimate, and officials from the information technology (IT) offices of several state agencies called the author to assess whether the emails were associated with a cybersecurity risk. Additionally, several potential respondents informed the author that the policies set forth by their IT offices prevented them from participating, and others indicated that their IT offices send similar messages to “test” the employees’ compliance with agency policies. Separately, several potential respondents also told the author that their agency barred employees from completing outside surveys or participating in academic research unless the activities were pre-approved by the agency head.

<sup>3</sup>In late 2021, one of the authors surveyed the employee directories of all fifty states to determine whether the state posted publicly the email addresses of its employees publicly. At that time, 25 states provided such information publicly. From those 25 states, one of the authors selected a subset of states where it was most feasible to collect the email addresses given the formatting of each state’s directory and such that the subset would demonstrate substantial variation across important state-level characteristics, such as geographic location, partisan control of the governor’s office and state legislative chambers, and the relative size of different racial and ethnic groups in the state population.

The total number of unique email addresses collected from these nine states is 252,316. Initial email invitations were sent to all unique email addresses between May 31 and June 3, 2024, and reminder emails were sent to all respondents that had not yet completed the survey on June 11 and June 18, 2024. Response collection ceased at the end of the day on June 26, 2024, with 2,540 respondents having provided an answer to at least one of the four outcome questions in the module containing our experiment. Subtracting the 33,213 emails which were deemed invalid once emails were distributed (i.e., those Qualtrics reported as “blocked,” “bounced,” or “failed”), the response rate for this module is approximately 1.2% ( $\frac{2,540}{219,103}$ ).

## B.2 Vignette and Question Wording

After completing a series of pre-treatment questions, respondents were asked to imagine that they work for the department of transportation in another state and presented with a short vignette describing a recent snowstorm the state experienced that caused significant traffic problems and prompted criticism of the state’s handling of the storm. In this vignette, two facets were independently randomized across respondents: 1) how the governor response to public criticism of the state’s handling of the storm and 2) information about how well the department of transportation prepared for the storm. The wording of the vignette and the different treatments associated with each facet are presented below.

### B.2.1 Vignette

Imagine the following scenario:

You work for the department of transportation in another state. A major snowstorm recently hit your state. [AGENCY PREPAREDNESS]. During the course of the storm, major traffic delays and several car accidents occurred on state roadways.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, legislators, journalists, and members of the public have criticized the state for its handling of the storm.

In a post-storm press conference yesterday, the state’s governor addressed this criticism, saying that [GOVERNOR’S RESPONSE]. The governor pledged to review the state’s snowstorm response protocol to try to minimize traffic problems and car accidents during future storms.

- Treatment Conditions
  - Agency Preparedness
    - \* CONTROL: *Blank*
    - \* PREPARED: Your department correctly assessed the severity of the storm and deployed the appropriate number of crews to treat and clear the roads.
    - \* UNDERPREPARED: Your department underestimated the severity of the storm and deployed fewer crews to treat and clear the roads than was necessary.
  - Governor’s Response
    - \* CONTROL: “I am sorry that many of our state’s residents were stuck on the roads, but it’s too early to place blame for why the state roadways were in such poor condition.”

- \* BLAME CLAIM: “I am sorry that many of our state’s residents were stuck on the roads. As governor, I am ultimately responsible for the management of state roadways, and I accept blame for this situation.”
- \* BLAME DEFLECT: “I am sorry that many of our state’s residents were stuck on the roads, but the state’s department of transportation is ultimately responsible for the management of state roadways, and they are to blame for this situation.”
- \* BLAME SHARE: “I am sorry that many of our state’s residents were stuck on the roads. As governor, I share responsibility with the state’s department of transportation for the management of state roadways, and I accept some of the blame for this situation.”

### B.2.2 Question Wording

- How much trust do you have in this state governor to defend your department when it faces *warranted* criticism?
  - No trust at all
  - A little trust
  - A moderate amount of trust
  - A lot of trust
  - A great deal of trust
- How much trust do you have in this state governor to defend your department when it faces *unwarranted* criticism?
  - No trust at all
  - A little trust
  - A moderate amount of trust
  - A lot of trust
  - A great deal of trust
- How much effort do you expect this state governor to invest in supporting the mission and activities of your department?
  - No effort
  - A little effort
  - Some effort
  - A lot of effort
  - A great deal of effort
- Suppose this state governor asked you to participate in a task force that will review the state governor’s snowstorm response protocol to try to minimize traffic problems during future storms. How likely would you be to participate in the task force?
  - Very unlikely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Very unlikely

### B.3 Respondent Demographic Characteristics

The only systematic information we were able to collect about state government employees in the full sampling frame was their names, email addresses, and the states by which they were employed.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, we are unable to provide any insight on the degree to which our respondents are representative of those in the underlying sampling frame. We present information about survey responsiveness by state in Table SI.1.

For respondents who participated in the module containing our experiment, we collected information on a range of demographic characteristics before they started the module. We provide information about the characteristics of our sample of respondents in Table SI.2.

Table SI.1: Sampling Frame Response Rates by State

State	# respondents	# employees invited to participate	Response rate
Connecticut	191	11,929	1.6%
Florida	435	68,178	0.6%
Illinois	29	1,840	1.6%
Indiana	166	27,168	0.6%
Nebraska	322	12,701	2.5%
New Hampshire	22	8,898	0.2%
North Carolina	536	48,283	1.1%
Oregon	750	36,460	2.1%
Vermont	89	3,645	2.4%
TOTAL	2,540	219,103	1.2%

Table SI.2: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Characteristic	# (%) of respondents
<u>Gender</u>	
Man	1150 (45.3%)
Woman	1334 (52.5%)
Something else/other	26 (1.0%)
Prefer not to say	26 (1.0%)
NA	4 (0.2%)
<u>Age</u>	
18-29	134 (5.3%)
30-49	1118 (44.0%)
50-64	1096 (43.1%)
65 or older	191 (7.5%)
NA	1 (0.0%)

<sup>4</sup>For some states, we were also able to collect information about the agency and/or office in which they worked and the physical address of their workplace. However, this information was not provided by all states and is not presented in a uniform format within and across states, so we are not able to use it in assessing sample representativeness.

Characteristic	# (%) of respondents
<u>Income</u>	
Less than \$25,000	7 (0.3%)
\$25,000-\$49,999	216 (8.5%)
\$50,000-\$74,999	463 (18.2%)
\$75,000-\$99,999	492 (19.4%)
\$100,000-\$199,999	1037 (40.8%)
\$200,000 or more	306 (12.0%)
NA	19 (0.7%)
<u>Education</u>	
Some high school, or less	2 (0.1%)
High school graduate or GED	81 (3.2%)
Some college, no 4-year degree	364 (14.3%)
College graduate	931 (36.7%)
Post-graduate degree	1158 (45.6%)
NA	4 (0.2%)
<u>Race</u>	
American Indian or Alaska Native	17 (0.7%)
American Indian or other Pacific Islander	10 (0.4%)
Asian	65 (2.6%)
Black or African-American	222 (8.7%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	5 (0.2%)
White	2073 (81.6%)
Other	132 (5.2%)
NA	16 (0.6%)
<u>Hispanic</u>	
Yes	165 ( 6.5%)
No	2340 (92.1%)
Prefer not to say	30 (1.2%)
NA	5 (0.2%)
<u>Party Identification</u>	
Strong Democrat	731 (28.8%)
Not a very strong Democrat	358 (14.1%)
Lean Democrat	306 (12.0%)
Independent	251 (9.9%)
Lean Republican	152 (6.0%)
Not a very strong Republican	216 (8.5%)
Strong Republican	287 (11.3%)
Other/NA	239 (9.4%)
<u>Ideology</u>	
Very liberal	272 (10.7%)
Liberal	629 (24.8%)
Slightly liberal	322 (12.7%)
Moderate	635 (25.0%)
Slightly conservative	202 (8.0%)
Conservative	364 (14.3%)
Very conservative	106 (4.2%)

Characteristic	# (%) of respondents
NA	10 (0.4%)
<u># Years Working for State Gov.</u>	
Less than 5 years	615 (24.2%)
5-10 years	721 (28.4%)
11-15 years	312 (12.3%)
16-20 years	296 (11.7%)
More than 20 years	593 (23.3%)
NA	3 (0.1%)
<u>Job Selection Method</u>	
Appointed by elected official	85 (3.3%)
Hired/promoted through civil service system	2066 (81.3%)
Other	386 (15.2%)
NA	3 (0.1%)

## C Empirical Analysis

Table SI.3: Effect of Gubernatorial Presentational Strategies on Perceptions of Governor

	Gov. Defend from Unwarranted Criticism	Gov. Defend from Warranted Criticism	Gov. Invest Effort in Agency	R Willing to Serve on Task Force
Intercept	2.80* (0.05)	2.64* (0.05)	3.18* (0.05)	3.30* (0.04)
Blame Claim	0.17* (0.06)	0.23* (0.06)	0.16* (0.06)	0.08 (0.05)
Blame Deflect	-0.79* (0.06)	-0.59* (0.06)	-0.45* (0.06)	-0.15* (0.05)
Blame Share	0.02 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.07 (0.05)
Num. obs.	2534	2532	2534	2538

Models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression. \* denotes coefficient estimate is statistically distinguishable from zero at the  $p < 0.05$  level (two-tailed). Dependent variable for each variable is denoted in the model heading. The omitted category for the governor's presentational strategy is the Control condition, in which the governor makes no comment about who is to blame for the poor handling of the snowstorm.

Table SI.4: Effect of Gubernatorial Presentational Strategies on Perceptions of Governor, Conditioned by Preparedness

	Gov. Defend from Unwarranted Criticism	Gov. Defend from Warranted Criticism	Gov. Invest Effort in Agency	R Willing to Serve on Task Force
Intercept	2.90*	2.75*	3.34*	3.37*
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Blame Claim	0.10	0.17	0.07	0.00
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Blame Deflect	-0.97*	-0.76*	-0.66*	-0.27*
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Blame Share	0.05	-0.02	-0.07	0.03
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Agency Prepared	-0.11	-0.13	-0.20	-0.06
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Agency Prepared	-0.11	-0.13	-0.20	-0.06
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Claim: Prepared	-0.02	-0.00	0.02	0.08
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.12)
Deflect: Prepared	0.04	0.04	0.10	0.07
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.12)
Share: Prepared	-0.21	-0.02	-0.07	-0.01
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.13)
Claim: Underprepared	0.27	0.18	0.26	0.15
	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.13)
Deflect: Underprepared	0.50*	0.49*	0.54*	0.28*
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.13)
Share: Underprepared	0.13	0.35*	0.24	0.14
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.13)
Num. obs.	2534	2532	2534	2538

Models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression. \* denotes coefficient estimate is statistically distinguishable from zero at the  $p < 0.05$  level (two-tailed). Dependent variable for each variable is denoted in the model heading. The omitted category for the governor's presentational strategy is the Control condition, in which the governor makes no comment about who is to blame for the poor handling of the snowstorm. The omitted category for the department's preparedness is the Control condition, in which no information is provided about whether the department adequately prepared for the snowstorm.