Career Public-Sector Employee Attitudes About Political Appointments: A Study of the U.S. Department of State

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long examined the inherent trade-offs between control and capability when presidents politicize the executive branch through their appointment powers, including through political appointments to federal agency leadership positions. Empirical research over the past few decades connects high ratios of appointees to career leaders with decreased agency performance and higher voluntary turnover at the career senior ranks. However, less attention has been dedicated to the effects of such appointments on the attitudes of the civil service workforce, factors which has been shown to influence organizational performance. Employing a study of the U.S. Department of State, I evaluate the relationship between degree of agency politicization and self-reported measures of engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction among civil servants. Analysis suggests that the ongoing reliance on outside political appointees in senior leadership by successive presidents impedes the State Department's efforts to build and sustain positive workforce attitudes. This study examines the effects of the institutionalized use of outside appointments on the broader federal workforce, presenting a new perspective for scholarly understanding of the dynamics at play when presidents politicize the agencies they are entrusted to lead.

Key Words: *executive branch, career civil service, politicization, engagement, job satisfaction, motivation, appointees*

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

U.S. presidents frequently use their appointment powers to exert control by placing trusted outsiders in positions of authority in federal government agencies. However, research has repeatedly shown that agencies with large numbers of outside leaders can struggle to perform effectively and lose experienced career civil servants at higher rates. While a connection between appointee leadership and performance is well established, researchers are less certain of what factors actually causes it to develop. In particular, little attention has been given to understanding the opinions of career employees of a federal agency about working within such a system or how those attitudes might help explain their behaviors at work. Through a study of one agency, the U.S. Department of State, I examine appointee-career relationships by exploring career employees' thoughts on leadership at the State Department, going beyond attitudes about specific leaders to evaluate whether using outside appointees to lead agencies creates barriers to employee recruitment, retention, and performance. The analysis suggests that, while the institutionalization of political appointments provides a president with greater control over an agency, the constant churn created through reliance on outsiders for leadership may harm an agency's ability to achieve its goals by undermining employee trust in leaders and the agency itself.

Key Words: *president, civil service, politicization, engagement, satisfaction, motivation, appointments, performance*

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Stephen Boyette, who has been the absolute champion of my life and all of its achievements.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The services provided by federal agencies to its citizens touch every American life in multiple ways, making the work of the career civil service critical to the smooth operation of the machinery of government. Building and sustaining a workforce capable of delivering those services consistently in an increasingly complex world should, therefore, be a primary focus of agency leadership. However, a scan of the federal work landscape suggests that all is not well with federal employees, as many agencies report increasing concerns about their ability to recruit and retain the next generation of public servants. While a wide body of research exists that explores and explains the dynamics connected with positive workplace attitudes and behaviors, less attention has been paid to organizational elements that are more prevalent in the public sector than in the for-profit sphere. Importantly, examinations of public-sector organizational dynamics are often limited to the capabilities, performance, and influence associated with those in senior leadership roles. In the federal government such positions are often filled by political appointees, organizational outsiders who may have little to no direct experience with the agencies they are entrusted to lead, which may pose challenges in developing the trust necessary to foster the sustained organizational commitment that drives ongoing performance.

Drawing from the extant scholarly literature on organizational leader-follower dynamics, this study explores the how career civil servants perceive leadership within their organizations and how those perceptions may be associated with their workplace attitudes and behavior. In a novel approach, the study examines whether structural elements within an organization may contribute to how employees interpret what they

observe of their leaders and what they conclude about their organization's approach to leadership. Specifically, it assesses these dynamics through the lens of the particularly public-sector phenomenon of political appointments and the institutionalization of routinely placing outsiders in positions of power across the federal bureaucracy by listening to and interpreting the voices of career members of the U.S. Department of State (hereinafter "the State Department," "the Department," or "State"). The remainder of this chapter will provide some background and context of appointments in federal agencies, then present the particular research problem and its relevance for scholars and practitioners. An overview of the aims and objectives of the research guiding this dissertation follows, along with the specific questions the study seeks to answer. Finally, the chapter concludes by delineating the scope of the research, including its limitations, and providing a brief outline of the dissertation's structure.

In 2021 the Harvard Kennedy School released the results of a study commissioned by the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) following the well-publicized departures of several high-level career officials at the U.S. Department of State during the Trump Administration. The study examined the attitudes of foreign service officers (FSOs) towards their work, including their commitment to the State Department and its mission. A key finding of the study, headlining numerous mainstream press articles, was that nearly a third (31.42%) of current FSOs were "actively seeking" opportunities to separate from the Foreign Service (Zuniga et al., 2021). Subsequent discussions about the report's findings among current and former FSOs often included observations that dire warnings like this seemed to arise every five to six years, yet the

attrition numbers never reflected the kind of mass exodus the surveys suggested were imminent.

The prevailing literature on organizational dynamics suggests that members who are disgruntled enough to express a desire to separate from the organization are unlikely to have the positive workplace attitudes most closely associated with effective employee performance, including engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Low levels of these constructs are correlated with a range of negative outcomes in organizations, including shirking, absenteeism, voluntary turnover, and decreased performance. However, it was unclear from both the Harvard report and the federal government's own staffing data if such dynamics were occurring in the State Department, prompting a number of interrelated questions: Could the findings in the AFSA report signal a different phenomenon in which FSOs are discontented enough to *consider* leaving the State Department (and say so publicly) but ultimately decide to stay? If so, what happens to those negative feelings and attitudes that led FSOs to entertain thoughts of separating? And what contributes to career employees developing those attitudes in the first place?

While the scholarly literature is well established on many of the elements that can contribute to the way organizational members relate to their environment, less direct attention has been paid to factors that may be integrated into or even created by the organization's structure and approach to key components, including preparation and selection of leaders. Research clearly demonstrates that actions related to leadership are associated with many behaviors and attitudes among organizational members; however, the predominance of the literature focuses on relationships between how individual

leaders comport themselves and followers react, as well as common member responses to working within paradigmatic organizational structures, such as traditional bureaucracy or matrix styles. However, far less attention has been paid to evaluating whether other institutional elements could similarly help shape member attitudes about the organization. Because these factors have not been explored as thoroughly, researchers are left without fully satisfying answers to questions such as those posed herein about leadership within the State Department, and practitioners are less aware of – and, therefore, less able to influence intentionally – the dynamics at play in their organizational environments.

The study described in this dissertation aims to focus directly on that knowledge gap by investigating one such structural feature, presidential use of political appointments to fill leadership roles in federal organizations, by probing their use in one of the oldest of those agencies: the U.S. Department of State. Through a series of 42 semi-structured interviews with current and former career State Department professionals, the study addresses three research questions regarding political appointments and employee attitudes. The first, and primary, question is how do career civil servants perceive presidential use of political appointments, and could those perceptions contribute to their workplace attitudes? While an extensive literature on political appointments exists, it focuses largely on appointee performance, the politics related to appointee selection and confirmation, and, more recently, the behaviors of senior career officials in response to appointees. However, little attention has been paid to the greater workforce in federal agencies and whether the systematized used of appointments may result in responses or behaviors similar to those attributed to their senior-level peers.

A second research question probes a potential outcome if appointments are connected with negative feelings among employees that might extend beyond their response to an individual appointee and be reflected in their workplace behaviors. If the use of political appointments is related to adverse attitudes, is that negativity similarly connected to individual employee performance declines? The influence of leaders generally on organizational member behaviors and attitudes is well-documented, if sometimes contested, by a range of scholars in the management and public administration fields. Does the nature of political appointments – i.e., leaders drawn from outside the organizations they are tapped to lead – add another facet that has been overlooked in studies of organizational dynamics? Scholars have previously connected high degrees of politicization, such as an agency having many appointees, with performance declines in public agencies: could individual performance declines in response to appointments help explain this negative relationship? This final research question points to the underlying importance of exploring these dynamics for public officials with policy goals and for the citizens whose lives are affected by agencies' ability to execute those agendas. By listening to the voices of career agency employees themselves describe how they experience, interpret, and respond to serving under and alongside political appointees throughout their careers, this study shines an important light on a facet of public-sector workplace dynamics that has received little attention from scholars to date.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the ideas of the legitimacy of authority and the bi-directionality of the leader-follower relationship as drawn from Barnard's (1971/1938) conceptualization, which places significant emphasis on perception as a critical driver of these phenomena; therefore, follower input is critical

understanding the dynamics and their effects in organizations. These research questions involve complex phenomena that require context and deep probing to elicit and distinguish them from similar dynamics. Applying these well-established concepts to a specific form of the leader-follower dyad – the appointee-careerist pairing – provides a new lens through which to view and understand leadership in federal agencies that rely on a longstanding tradition of strict adherence to rigid hierarchies in which power and authority are formally invested in the position, not the individual who fills it.

The purpose of the study is not to identify a generalizable theory but to use the words of the members of a single organization to uncover potential dynamics that may be connected with their own attitudes or behaviors in ways that can undermine their ability to achieve collective goals. Attempts at capturing these through commonly used quantitative tools, such as surveys, experiments, or analysis of existing data sets, has proven very difficult for many researchers. Storytelling, on the other hand, offers richer data for analysis by opening wider windows in the assumptions, experiences, inferences, and conclusions of the participants. In addition, this qualitative approach aligns well with my underlying interpretivist philosophy and my iterative approach to collecting, coding, and analyzing the data collected. Importantly, this research also does not seek to test hypotheses; it is more exploratory with the goal of developing a new theoretical understanding of observable phenomena.

To explore the dynamics raised in the research questions, I conducted a cross-sectional study designed to collect data at a single point in time to account for the multiple variables present in each participant consisting of a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with 42 current and former career employees of the State

Department during the summer of 2023. There are several structural factors that made this agency an attractive option for the study, including its bifurcation into two halves (the civil and foreign services) with the same overall mission and senior leaders. In addition, my prior relationship with the agency as a former foreign service officer provided access to, and credibility with, potential participants that resulted in frank discussion and better data. When evaluating the data resulting from these interviews, I applied the reflexive thematic analytical method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021; 2006) to leverage my own subjectivity in drawing conclusions from participants' descriptions of both their time with the Department and, critically, how they interpreted what they experienced. The reflexive approach to thematic analysis is also particularly useful in exploratory research that aims to identify new concepts or develop novel theories from complex qualitative data. From this analysis, I identified several themes that may offer greater understanding of appointee-careerist relationships as well as careerist attitudes and beliefs about leadership more generally in the State Department.

The extant scholarly literature on organizational leadership places significant responsibility on the leaders themselves for developing and maintaining an environment that is conducive to effective employee performance. The most foundational of these is the follower's trust in their leaders that arises out of their beliefs about the leaders' capabilities, motivations, and alignment with organizational norms. Importantly, trust takes time to develop and is predicated on follower perceptions of what they observe in the workplace. Building on well-established scholarly theories of organizational dynamics, this study applies three paradigms of work-related attitudes: engagement, job satisfaction, and motivation. Motives are a major area of focus in this study because they

can help answer the "why?" questions arising from observed behaviors. During the study, participants often conveyed their own motivations while speculating on those of others, especially political appointees, uncovering some interesting, though unsupported, presumptions that contribute to other attitudes about their leaders and peers. The perceived relationship between individual motives and behaviors touches on organizational dynamics like agenda-setting, prioritization, and the expectations of accountability associated with the responsibility of leadership and normative debates in public administration.

Eliciting and understanding the dynamics specifically associated with political appointees requires probing beyond the usual leader-follower dyad. The challenges associated with serving under a succession of leaders some may view as unqualified and/or untrusting of their workforce's capabilities and motives are rarely addressed in the public administration or public management literature. There are some interesting parallels in scholarly examinations of the relationship between nepotism and employee attitudes, especially in regard to development of leader trust. More generally, however, this study proposes new ways to interpret the appointee-careerist relationship towards a better understanding of leadership in public organizations. The pain points raised by participants, including the constancy of change and its effects, are frequently framed through the lens of leadership: wanting leaders who have lived the same experience and therefore understand it, believing those leading the Department do not prioritize leadership ability in making assignments, and concluding the organization more generally does not care about career employee development. Many describe the negative effects on organizational performance they attribute to these leadership failures and how that has

shifted their attitudes and efforts toward what will benefit themselves and/or their families, and away from the "needs of the service."

To establish the context from which I drew my theoretical framework, this dissertation begins with a review of the extant literature related to employee workplace attitudes, including how they can manifest in behaviors, where they interrelate with – and diverge from – each other, and potential contributors to their development, the most critical of which is the organizational leader. The leader's role in fostering and sustaining constructive workplace attitudes begins with the concept of trust predicated on follower perceptions, but it does not end there. The literature draws a clear connection between those attitudes and employee behaviors while highlighting that all can, and frequently do, change throughout an employee's tenure. The literature review also discusses politicization through appointments and scholars' understanding of the dynamics that contribute to presidents' ongoing reliance on them as a frame for interpreting participants' responses to working under series of appointees.

The next chapter presents the theoretical framework guiding this study, beginning with my research philosophy. My goal is to understand interpersonal dynamics and behaviors by interpreting the context in which they are situated and the subjective meanings attached by those who experience them, leading me to embrace an interpretivist research philosophy as it assumes that true understanding comes only by evaluating them in relation to social constructions like shared meaning and language (Myers, 2008). Applying the principles of symbolic interactionalism as explicated by Blumer (1969), the interpretivist philosophy allows for deep probing of complex phenomena to identify, interpret, and distinguish the interrelated dynamics of interest. The theoretical framework

itself derives from Barnard (1971/1938) and Follett's (2011) conceptualizations of leader-follower relations, with particular emphasis on *perception* as a critical component of these connections. The fundamental importance of leader trust and its contribution to organizational commitment are clearly defined in the scholarly literature, but what is less firmly established is what to expect when establishment of those trust bonds is inhibited, even in organizations that are strongly hierarchical and oriented towards duty, consistency, and risk aversion. Importantly, the most pertinent literature arises from the disciplines of organizational behavior, industrial and organizational psychology, and leadership; this study offers an opportunity to apply the lessons derived from that rich body of prior research to public-sector organizations to identify novel insights.

The details of my research design follow in the fourth chapter, including the research approach, sampling strategy, collection methods, and coding and analytical processes. Included in this explanation is contextual information about the State Department as the organization of interest and a description of the data set resulting from the study. The next chapter presents the study's findings using the words of the participants themselves and organized around four thematic areas: behaviors; organizational attitudes; leader traits; and political attributes. As noted, I undertook a reflexive thematic approach to analysis involving multiple rounds of both deductive and inductive codes to identify the key themes raised in the interviews, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 6. My analysis of these themes led to the conclusion that the constant change in leadership through the use of political appointments at the State Department is negatively related to the Department's ability to recruit, develop, and retain the workforce necessary to execute its foreign affairs mission. Importantly, I identify three

organizational structures that contribute to this relationship: control; time-boundedness; and politicization.

This dissertation concludes with a summary of the study's key findings and potential implications for the State Department's current and future leaders, as well as the career men and women who execute its day-to-day mission. Generalizability was not a goal of this study, which is reflected in the choice of research design and analytical approach. However, while the study captured dynamics within one specific agency as described by a particular subset of organizational stakeholders, its outcomes provide new perspectives for evaluating the leader-follower relationship and suggest extending its scope will yield even more insights. These dynamics are complex, and scholars continue to pursue more effective methods for assessing them and their connections with workplace behaviors to the benefit of all organizational members. By casting a light on an oft-overlooked element of public-sector organizations, this study contributes new insights towards that worthwhile endeavor.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Examining the relationship between the use of outside appointments and employee attitudes towards both their work and their organizations more broadly draws on four constructs: politicization and the three components of workplace attitudes, namely intrinsic; role-specific; and organizational. Broadly, workplace or "job" attitudes are evaluative reflections an employee's beliefs, feelings, and attachment to their occupation (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Within the three components, scholarship offers multiple conceptualizations and approaches to measuring their influence in organizations. It is important to understand these concepts, how they develop within the organizational setting, the role leaders can play in their development (or in inhibiting that development), and – critically – how they differ from each other. Their importance lies in these attitudes' ability to affect employee performance, both on individually and collectively.

The following review of the pertinent literature will first outline the three constructs and their connection with organizational performance. Next, it will examine the role of the organizational leader in fostering and/or sustaining positive workplace attitudes through the development of trust in both the leader and, by extension, the organization. Particular attention will be paid to how this plays out in public-sector organizations, which must contend with the influence of politics and partisanship in addition to the dynamics found in most formal organizations. It will then define politicization, enumerate its established effects in public-sector organizations, and situate presidential appointment powers in the context of the modern civil service. Finally, it will

provide critical context for the civil service as it operates within the agency of interest, the U.S. Department of State.

Organization-Level Influence on Attitudes: Employee Engagement

Throughout the past century, scholars have proposed, examined, debated, and revised various theoretical constructs to explain the behaviors of organizational members and the factors that influence them. Kahn (1990) is the first to propose "employee engagement" as a unique scholarly construct, identifying its three main characteristics as meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Kahn (1990) defines the distinct construct of engagement as primarily a psychological state, based on an *overall* relationship between an individual employee and organization. This organizational-level component of the engagement relationship distinguishes it from work/organization commitment, which is driven predominantly by an employee's intrinsic values, and job satisfaction, which is specific to the role the employee currently fills within the organization (Agrawal, 2015; Macey & Schneider, 2008). At its most basic, employee engagement is an "active, work-related positive psychological state" that results in the *voluntary* expenditure of an individual's mental energy toward the achievement of organizational goals (Shuck et al., 2017, p. 954). What is critical in understanding engagement and distinguishing it from other workplace attitudes its "whole-of-organization" orientation that incorporates and builds upon those attitudes, such job satisfaction, personal motivation, or alignment with the organization's mission, vision, or values. In this conception, engagement is less of an attitude than a state of being in relation to one's organization of which the employee may or may not be truly cognizant (Kahn, 1990).

In the intervening three decades, a variety of scholars extend or build onto Kahn's original conception of engagement, including Kahn himself, particularly in highlighting the importance of an employee's perception of the meaning to be found in the work they perform. Kahn and Fellows (2013) frame this dynamic in how an employee "experiences meaningfulness" in the workplace, noting that there are two main sources for this meaning: "foundational," which is driven by the nature of the work, and "relational," which derives from the social relationships encountered in the workplace. The emphasis on perceived meaning is mostly absent from later conceptualizations of engagement, such as that put forth by Schaufeli et al. (2006), which purports engagement to represent the opposite of burnout, or what Shuck and Wollard define generically as "an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes" (2010, p. 103). As Macey and Schneider (2008) point out, the meaning of the term "employee engagement" can be ambiguous, even among researchers, but it remains an important organizational force. As organizations are ultimately social collectives, Kahn's (1990, 2013) inclusion of *relational* sources of meaning in his conception of engagement best encompasses the fluid dynamism of interaction between organizational members.

Scholars point to four main contributors to engagement: an individual's inherent motivations and attitudes (Cooper et al., 2014; Vandenabeele et al., 2014; Mussagulova, 2021); organizational factors (such as culture) (Alarcon et al., 2010; Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013); experiences related to the individual's current role/job within the organization (including the relationship with their immediate supervisor) (Saks, 2006; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; (Shuck et al., 2011); and the behaviors of organizational

leaders (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Asencio, 2016; Sharafizad et al., 2020). The importance of the last component is underscored in Zahari and Kaliannan's (2022) systematic review of the engagement literature, in which they find that employee/follower perceptions of leadership capabilities are among the "most significant antecedents" of engagement among civil servants (p. 12). The particular combination of components varies between individuals and even between the various professional circumstances in which they find themselves, though the role of leader behaviors persists as a key contributor (Zahari & Kaliannan, 2022).

In fact, leadership actions and their perceived quality factor into each of these components either directly or indirectly. Leader behaviors and capabilities are the most obvious of these, perhaps as they are the most visible (especially when detrimental to engagement, such as through being dishonest), but leaders can, and often do, influence the other three factors as well. Employee empowerment has been found to be an important contributor to engagement and its positive influence on employee performance; that empowerment relies on leadership to have both confidence in the employee's capabilities and the willingness to delegate authority on a consistent basis (Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2013). While leaders may not be the primary catalysts for employee motivation or job satisfaction, through their actions they can create environments that are either conducive or inhibiting to such attitudes (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Hansen et al., 2014). For example, leaders can ensure that employees possess, or are given the opportunity to develop, the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed in their organizational role. This requires time and effort expenditure to analyze job requirements, craft accurate job descriptions, and evaluate candidate qualifications

effectively, all actions within the purview of the organizational leader, either themselves or through delegates like human resource or operational managers (Xu & Thomas, 2011).

Engagement can influence employee behaviors that, in turn, may affect performance, both individually and collectively, and multiple scholars repeatedly demonstrate the validity of the theorized connection between these actions and the state of engagement. Positive effects include higher levels of organizational commitment, efficiency, and output (Rich et al., 2010). Engaged employees are also more likely to demonstrate better organizational citizenship, such as longer tenures in their roles, decreased absenteeism, and willingness to go "above and beyond" in their jobs (Cernas Ortiz et al., 2013; Shuck et al., 2017). Conversely, employees who become disengaged from their organizations – or never reach an engaged state – are more likely to demonstrate behaviors ranging from shirking to absenteeism to voluntary separation, all of which can have a detrimental impact from the organizational perspective by negatively affecting individual productivity and performance (Kahn, 1990; Rana et al., 2014). Engagement, however, does not exist in a vacuum or occur spontaneously; scholars have identified and tested critical antecedents that affect its development, including specific job characteristics, relationships with immediate coworkers and supervisors, and the employee's personal motivations, including how subject to external influence those motivations may be (Rana et al., 2014; Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006).

In the broader scholarly literature, employee engagement is raised repeatedly as a critical element in creating and sustaining the type of organizational commitment and citizenship that, in turn, is correlated with positive organizational behaviors by members. Unlike its related constructs, such as satisfaction, person-job fit, or motivation,

engagement represents the connection between employee and organization that is most subject to influence by organizational leaders, both individually (by a particular leader) and collectively (by actions taken on behalf of the organization more generally). Decisions about organizational mission, strategic goals, and resource allocations are all linked to levels of engagement (Rana et al, 2014; Mussagalova, 2021; McManus & Mosca, 2015). While these may be viewed by organizational leaders as practical decisions, for workers – especially those not included in making those decisions – these organizational elements can affect the feelings of safety, meaning, and availability that underpin their commitment to the organization (Kahn, 1990; Kahn, 2013; Ariani, 2013). Drawing on these perspectives, engagement can be framed as an outward sign of the level of trust an employee has in their organization and its ability to protect them.

Role-Level Influence on Attitudes: Job Satisfaction

Research has long demonstrated that employee attitudes are often influenced by their immediate work experience, including job fit, their relationship with their immediate supervisor, the availability of resources, and interpersonal dynamics with their colleagues (Wright & Davis, 2003a). Collectively, these factors contribute to an employee's job satisfaction, which Locke (1969) defines as a "pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experience" (p. 300). The immediate relationships an employee experiences in their daily work, such as with a supervisor or teammates, can either foster or inhibit development of the psychological safety necessary for satisfaction (May et al., 2004). While some researchers connect higher job satisfaction with certain personality traits, such as extroversion or agreeableness, most highlight the greater contribution of the work environment itself,

including the influence of organizational leaders (Cooper et al., 2014b; Wright & Davis, 2003b). Driscoll (1978) underscores the importance of organizational trust in increasing employee job satisfaction, while Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013) point to employee empowerment, which they conceptualize as how those with power share it with those without, as a key factor. Both of these elements are directly tied to the attitudes and actions of organizational leaders. In the public sector, leader decisions impact organizational stability and determine to what extent employees are protected from environmental hazards (O'Toole et al., 1999).

The extent of job satisfaction an employee experiences can be influenced by some of their own predispositions, though scholars caution that leaders should not assume that an employee's level of satisfaction is entirely of their own making. Cooper et al. (2014a) suggest that certain personality traits, such as extroversion and agreeability, are associated with higher levels of satisfaction; conversely, individuals tending towards neuroticism are more likely to be dissatisfied with their immediate work environment regardless of its particular elements. Similarly, Bright (2008) highlights the importance of job fit (e.g., an employee having the right knowledge, skills, abilities, and outlook to fulfill job requirements) in mediating the relationship between levels of job satisfaction and more intrinsic elements, like motivation. An individual's natural propensity to trust in organizational leaders' motives and actions will also affect their level of satisfaction, particularly when they – or the leader – is new to the organization.

Scholars connect job satisfaction with a range of positive outcomes, both for the individual employee and, collectively, for their organization. When an employee is satisfied with their job, especially its immediate environment, they are more productive,

achieve higher rates of customer/client satisfaction, and are less likely to separate from their organization (Caillier, 2011; Harter et al., 2002; Pitts et al., 2011). Strong fit with their role's requirements can impart a deeper sense of meaning in an employee's work, thereby increasing their personal pleasure in – and commitment to – performing it (May et al., 2004). A positive, trust-based relationship with an immediate supervisor boosts employee citizenship behaviors and organizational commitment (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Top et al., 2013). Indeed, interpersonal cooperation throughout an organization is predicated on trust, which serves as "the glue which binds the leader to her/his followers and provides the capacity for organizational and leadership success" (Mineo, 2014, p. 1).

A critical difference between job satisfaction and engagement is how it connects employees' responses to their immediate environment with their understanding and embrace of the organization's mission. Satisfaction, therefore, is more transient than engagement: it can develop – or decline – much faster than feelings of engagement, which often depends on development of trust in leadership over time (McManus & Mosca, 2015; Hassan & Ahmed, 2011). Should a contributory element change, such as addition of unfamiliar work requirements or separation of a difficult supervisor, the employee's level of satisfaction is likely to shift in response. The key dynamic is the dependence of satisfaction tied to the employee's day-to-day *experience* of their work and their perceptions of support, trust, and capability among their colleagues and immediate supervisor. While organizational leaders can influence many of these factors, however, how an individual employee perceives and responds to those factors can differ due to their personal or inherent orientations, including their expectations of the role, team, or supervisor; their confidence in their own ability to execute their role; and the

combination of attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs that comprise their personal work – or "intrinsic" – motivation.

Employee-Level Influence on Attitudes: Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is, fundamentally, an individual predisposition towards particular attitudes, beliefs, and responses to the organizational environment that influence the level of effort the individual puts forth towards achievement of the collective organizational goals (Pandey et al., 2008; Perry & Wise, 1990). Whether those attitudes are viewed as "positive," "negative," or "neutral" can depend on the perspective: from the organization's view, "positive" motivations contribute to the shared capabilities and "negative" motivations decrease or inhibit those contributions. From the employee's perspective, however, their internal motivations are likely to reflect the particular combination of influential factors they have encountered throughout their lives. When individual employees join organizations, they bring with them an inherent level of motivation informed by a host of experiences, internalized influences, and normative attitudes. Bertelli (2006) identifies two sources of this personal motivation:(1) the gratification derived by the performance of tasks associated with their organizational role(s); and (2) the "instrumental value of goal achievement" that becomes rewarding in and of itself, with the latter, connection directly with the organization's overall mission (p. 6). This intrinsic motivation, while often fully formed, can evolve over time as the employee progressing through their working life. Importantly, it remains subject to external factors to varying degrees, including job fit, perceived status in the organization, and leader behaviors (Wright & Pandey, 2008; Gabris & Simo, 1995).

An individual employee's level of motivation is informed by the totality of their experience in both their professional and personal lives and, therefore, evolves over time (Tremblay et. al, 2009). The employee's "baseline" level of motivation predates their entry into the organization and, in some cases, may contribute to their decision to join the organization itself (Perry & Wise, 1990). As it can be subject to several influences, motivation can also shift in positive or negative directions during an employee's tenure in their organizational role, particularly during periods of change in job scope, organizational direction, or – most commonly – the composition of the work team and/or leadership (Haywood & Burke, 1977). What is particularly important to recognize about motivation is that it is inherently qualitative – measuring satisfaction effectively requires the researcher to consider the context that may influence a subject's comments regarding their level of motivation and to what degree certain external dynamics, particularly relationships with others, are shaping it (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Like other workplace attitudes, motivation in and of itself is not visible – only the behaviors it influences are, which can result in organization members drawing inaccurate conclusions as to why other members behave the way they do. As Tremblay et. al (2009) caution, these presumptions can be particularly inaccurate when it comes to motivations as members often frame others' motives from their own perspectives.

Some researchers define a sub-category of intrinsic motivation occurring in the public and non-profit sectors. This "public service motivation" (PSM) is characterized as a "responses to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations" (Perry & Wise, 1990, p. 368). Workers who pursue a career in the public sector can be motivated by either a general sense of altruism or a deeper connection to a

particular agency or institution's mission (Bozeman & Su, 2015). In either case, studies demonstrate a connection between employees scoring high on PSM measures and increased levels of organizational commitment, individual job satisfaction, and individual performance, all of which can improve overall agency performance (Hansen & Kjeldsen, 2018); Vandenabeele et al., 2014; Christensen et al., 2017). Importantly, however, scholars caution that these relationships can depend on employee perceptions of their alignment with organizational values and how well they fit in their assigned organizational role (Wright & Pandey, 2008; Bright, 2008). As Wright and Pandey (2008) point out, there can be a gap between an agency's *general* ability to satisfy "public service motives" and a *particular* employee's experience, especially if that experience does not fit with their expectation of service contribution due to value incongruence, role constraints, or disagreement over what actually constitutes "public service" (p. 506).

Connecting Attitudes and Behaviors

Recognizing and measuring levels of workplace attitudes, however, can be complicated by the fact that the most visible evidence of it, such as increasing quit rates or decreased work output, can be attributed to a range of other factors and depends most heavily on self-reported indicators in surveys or interviews (Rana & Ardichvili, 2015). Shrotyria and Dhanda (2019) also note that assessing an organization's level of employee engagement is challenged by the lack of consensus on how to define the term, leading to the development of measuring tools that disagree on which variables to include and that can differ in reliability and/or validity. These instruments conceive of engagement as the opposite of burnout (Schaufeli, 2012); as a reflection of an individual's enthusiasm for the work itself (Harter et al., 2002); as a measure of the relationship with their immediate

supervisor (Saks, 2006) or perceived job quality (James et al., 2011); or as the outcome of an employee's intellectual connection to their workplace (Soane et al., 2012). The job engagement measure proposed by Rich et al. (2010) gauges the psychological safety and meaningfulness emphasized in Kahn's (1990) original conception of engagement. However, Rich and his colleagues (2010) differentiate between attitudes that are associated with an employee's immediate environment, such as job fit, job satisfaction, or supervisor relationship with that employee's *emotional* connection with the entire organization. That relationship reflects the alignment of the employee and the organization's values, as well as the employee's belief in the organization's commitment to their personal success. The most commonly cited measure in scholarly studies is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which conceptualizes engagement as the opposite of burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2006). While the UWES can be useful in describing engagement in product/service-delivery focused organizations, its successful application to public-sector organizations requires customization to adjust for the absence of a profit motive (Wijesekera et al., 2020).

A common thread in the engagement literature is its conceptualization as representative of an employee's opinions, beliefs, and/or commitment to the organization more generally (Agrawal, 2015; Schaufeli, 2012). This whole-of-organization focus occurs concurrently – but separately – from feelings towards their current role, their inherent approach to work, and other influences in the immediate work environment, such as relationship with their supervisor, physical workspace, or team cohesion. In measuring each of these, it is important to separate professed attitudes and observable behaviors that demonstrate intrinsic motivation or job satisfaction this larger dynamic,

including the expending of discretionary behavior on behalf of the organization (Schaufeli, 2012), expressed belief in its commitment to organizational justice (Strom et al., 2014), and buy-in with the organization's overall stated mission (Agrawal, 2015). Therefore, to capture an employee's level of engagement, instruments must probe deeper and more broadly than whether or not an employee enjoys their daily tasks, gets along with teammates, or feels supported by their immediate supervisor (Amabile et al., 1994; Bertelli, 2006; Cooper et al., 2014b; Driscoll, 1978; Pandey et al., 2008; Park, 2012; Wright & Davis, 2003b).

Identification and measurement of the other two attitudes of interest, job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation, each have their own challenges. As the locus of interest for satisfaction is necessarily immediate – e.g., how does the employee view their *current* role and work environment – instruments must be sufficiently explicit to differentiate between attitudes towards the current role versus the broader organization, as well as from the employee's own innate orientation towards their work. A 2003 systematic review of such instruments finds several that demonstrate both reliability and validity, citing the "Job in General Scale (JIG)" proposed by Ironson et al. in 1989 as particularly adept at evaluating multiple elements of job satisfaction regardless of work sector or cultural context (van Saane et al., 2003). Given the range of roles, backgrounds, and work environments within the State Department (particularly for FSOs posted overseas), an instrument with broad applicability seems to be the best choice.

Connecting attitudes and behaviors is important to identifying relationships between them. When viewed by others, an individual's motives, engagement, and satisfaction are commonly inferred based on their behaviors. The ability to do so

accurately is, like many leader attributes, often acquired over time through experience, though the individual leader's capability to separate their own attitudinal biases from those of their subordinates can vary dramatically between contexts and leaders themselves. A range of behaviors by employees can serve as "visible markers" of their attitudes, such turnover rates, discretionary effort expenditure, organizational citizenship, and overall performance. While the aforementioned attitudes can overlap, and each can influence visible markers to varying degrees, understanding their effects on the organization's ability to perform depends on recognizing the scope of those effects and the underlying dynamics that influence them. Motivation is primarily internal to the individual, so its impacts are generally limited to the individual's performance unless that individual encumbers a position of significant influence in the organization, such as a subject matter expert or as a mentor to newer employees. Satisfaction is tied to the immediate job environment and role requirements; therefore, the ability for organizational representatives to shift it is more direct than for motivation or engagement, and, therefore, it can pose less of a threat to overall performance than other attitudes.

The Criticality of Organization and Leader Trust

Scholars repeatedly highlight the influence of organizational leaders in creating conditions conducive to high employee performance, such as fostering engagement among the workforce. This effect is most pronounced in developing and sustaining trust in leadership to have both the right capabilities *and* right motives to steer the organization. Trust in leaders – particularly in leader integrity – mediates the relationship between leadership and engagement during periods of organizational change by mitigating employee uncertainty or fear related to that change, including changes in

leadership (Islam et al., 2021; Chakravarthy & Gargiulo, 1998; Kim & Moon, 2021; Bensemann et al., 2021). Perceived leader integrity plays a critical role in legitimizing authority by fostering trust between an employee and leaders. Hawdon (2008) suggests this integrity, which he defines as individual alignment with organizational norms, drives the development of influence that transcends position-based authority. Credibility of leadership capability is necessarily external – one must be *judged* credible by others to establish a valid claim to authority (Esfahani et al., 2014); therefore, perceptions of integrity by organizational members, especially subordinates, play a significant role in legitimating leadership (Suchman, 1995). Indeed, McManus and Mosca (2015) argue that "nothing destroys trust faster than hypocrisy from management" (p. 38). For most employees, their organizational leaders and managers *are* the organization; individual leader behaviors, writ large, demonstrate the organization's values, norms, and expectations in ways a written mission statement and official policies cannot.

Trust in leadership boosts employee performance, empowerment, and organizational commitment, all of which are necessary for maintaining a motivated, satisfied, and engaged workforce (Porumbescu et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2018). In turn, these attitudes are important contributors to organizational performance: a workforce positively disposed towards its organization is more productive, experiences lower rates of voluntary turnover and absenteeism, and is more receptive to organizational change (Asencio, 2016; S. Y. Kim & Fernandez, 2017; Schaufeli, 2012). In the public sector, scholars note declining levels of trust in government leaders and organizational effectiveness, suggesting that trust in senior leadership is a critical factor in both organizational outcomes and the individual emotional commitment necessary for positive

workplace attitudes (Albrecht & Travaglione, 2003; Nalbandian, 1989; Nollenberger, 2007). While an individual employee's propensity to trust is a "good starting point," its existence does not absolve leaders of their responsibility to foster an environment conducive to leader-follower trust (Bernerth & Walker, 2009).

Drawing from the extant literature, a list emerges of leadership and management behaviors that positively influence employee opinions towards their work and organizations. These include transparent communication, acting with integrity as demonstrated by alignment with organizational values, the ability to articulate a clear vision, demonstration of a service orientation, and consistent provision of constructive feedback (Besieux et al., 2018; Popli & Rizvi, 2015; Top et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). What also emerges is an implied directive to organizational leaders who wish to foster or improve attitudes among their workforces: to achieve engagement and satisfaction, put in place leaders and managers who demonstrate these behaviors. In the case of politically appointed leaders, however, these are generally not the factors considered when selecting candidates. While competency in managing bureaucratic institutions is important, loyalty to the president and his or her policy agenda can be as important a consideration, if not more so, in making appointments (Waterman & Ouyang, 2020).

It is important to recognize here is that most of the foregoing literature derives from the management, leadership, human resources, and industrial and organizational psychology disciplines based on studies of predominantly for-profit organizations. As Rana and Ardichvili (2015) observe, there is significant interest in these organizational dynamics due to their connection and influence on member behaviors, especially those behaviors that contribute heavily to organizational success, such as commitment and

engagement (Rana & Ardichvili, 2015). There is a healthy debate among scholars in these disciplines about how to conceptualize, operationalize, and measure the various constructs that has resulted in advances in scholarly understanding of the organizational elements that can contribute to – or inhibit – member performance. When turning to the public administration literature, much of the focus is on how public-sector organizations may *differ* from their private-sector peers, which is certainly a worthy effort given the normative distinctions that may contribute to member behaviors. As a result of that attention, however, the public administration scholarship may have overlooked important lessons learned from studies of private sector organizational dynamics. Asencio (2016) pointedly raised the knowledge gap around leadership in public-sector organizations, calling on the field to prioritize "large-scale empirical studies…on the direct and indirect leadership behaviors on performance within public agencies" (Asencio, 2016, p. 2). Leaders and the behaviors they demonstrate in organizations are considered to be significant drivers of public-sector performance; therefore, scholars should be willing to draw from a variety of disciplines to identify potential areas for research (Brewer & Selden, 2000; Caillier, 2011). As, at their most basic level, all organizations are groupings of individuals who come together to achieve shared goals, it is reasonable that many of the relationship patterns and connections present in a for-profit business will also exist in non-profit or public-sector organizations.

Recent scholarship has examined the effects of changes in political leadership (e.g., new presidential administrations) on bureaucrats' attitudes and behaviors. While these studies are generally limited to evaluating senior-level career employee turnover, they demonstrate some interesting dynamics. While the size and composition of the

federal civil service is quite stable across administrations, research has shown that senior bureaucrat turnover tends to increase in agencies whose policy priorities diverge from those of a new president (Bolton et al., 2021). A similar effect can occur with a new agency leader whose views conflict with those of their agency (Dahlström & Holmgren, 2019). This suggests that appointees whose primary qualification is their commitment to lock-step alignment with presidential goals may inadvertently drive away those with the most experience and expertise.

Politicization through Appointments

Politicization can be characterized as "the injection of politics into otherwise neutral administration" (Wood & Lewis, 2017, p. 582). This, of course, presumes that public administration is inherently neutral, a belief not universally shared by scholars (Aberbach & Rockman, 1988; Rourke, 1992; Dahlstrom & Holmgren, 2019). Under the U.S. form of democratic governance, the elected official is held accountable for policy successes and failures by the voting citizenry, particularly in the executive branches of federal and state government; it is this personal responsibility that impels the imposition of controls on the administrative agencies that carry out those policy mandates (Limbocker et al., 2022). Presidents are political creatures; reaching the Oval Office requires assembling a broad network of supporters and operatives who align ideologically with them and commit to long-term support. Regardless of the specifics of each president's policy goals, they all work through the federal civil service to execute and enforce the resulting programs, regulations, and directives. Doing so effectively depends on the civil service possessing the necessary capabilities as well as sufficient loyalty from a presidential perspective to that president and/or their policy agenda (Aberbach &

Rockman, 1988). At the same time, some researchers cast serious doubt on the long-held belief that career civil servants perform their functions in a state of "neutral competence" that is inconsistent with empirical evidence that many bureaucrats employ political discretion in the course of their duties, thereby leading presidents to increase their politicization efforts (West, 2005; Piper, 2022).

Presidents have multiple methods at their disposal for exerting control over the administrative bureaucracy, including the issuance of executive orders, policy memoranda, and rules; influencing federal agency design; and appointments (J. D. Aberbach & Rockman, 1988; Dodds, 2022; Krause & O'Connell, 2019; Ouyang et al., 2017; Rogowski & Simko, 2022). By far, the most numerous form of politicization at the U.S. federal level is the installation of preferred candidates into leadership positions throughout federal agencies (Lewis, 2008). Modern U.S. presidents have more than 4,000 such appointments at their disposal, only one-third of which require the U.S. Senate's "advice and consent," thereby giving presidents wide latitude in installing leaders across and within agencies (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform, 2020). The majority of appointments, therefore, receive little to no public notice or scrutiny, allowing presidents significant latitude to reward loyalty and/or past (financial) support with appointed positions; the influences of these "invisible" appointments have received little scrutiny by scholars, who tend to focus on Senate-confirmed positions (Lewis & Waterman, 2013).

Several scholars observe that presidents must balance between competency and allegiance when selecting senior agency leaders, as potential appointees are generally stronger in one or the other, but not both (Fuenzalida & Riccucci, 2019; Piper, 2022;

Waterman & Ouyang, 2020). Some scholars have raised the question of what actually constitutes "competency" to presidents; if willingness to embrace and execute the administration's policy priorities by any means necessary, which careerists might view as more toward the "loyalty" end of the spectrum, equates to "merit" in the president's estimation, it is understandable that those factors could outweigh more quantitative measures, such as years of federal experience or level of relevant education (Waterman & Ouyang, 2020; Krause & O'Connell, 2019). Another element that may be important in appointee selection relate to presidentially directed shifts in power dynamics within the administration and how well an appointee can be expected to navigate the changed landscape, such as relations with a divided Congress or changes to the constitution of the president's cabinet. Some appointments may simply represent rewards to donors or long-time supporters of the president and/or their party, thereby providing presidents with a powerful tool to incentivize continued financial commitments and party loyalty (Haglund, 2014). More recently, some scholars have revisited the loyalty-competency trade-off by reexamining how the two concepts are defined and prioritize various "sub-dimensions," such as prior experience with required tasks, previous political work, and subject matter expertise, noting that "loyalty," long viewed anecdotally as the preeminent characteristic, can have varying meanings depending on the eye of the president (Ouyang et al., 2017). While the 1883 Pendleton Act ostensibly curbed the excesses of the spoils system of awarding plum federal jobs in exchange for political support, many scholars have noted that presidential reliance on "known entities" to take the lead on their policy agendas never disappeared (Aberbach & Rockman, 1988; Krause & O'Connell, 2019; Pfiffner, 1987).

Regardless of the reasons why presidents may turn to loyalists, research consistently connects agency politicization through appointments and increased voluntary turnover in the senior career ranks, leading to capacity and capability losses (Dahlström & Holmgren, 2019; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014). The sheer number of required appointments, coupled with a fraught confirmation process and heightened political rancor, has resulted in increasing numbers of vacancies in federal leadership positions, driven both by the inability to fill a role as well as frequent turnover among appointees (Dull et al., 2012; Limbocker et al., 2022; Resh et al., 2020; B. D. Wood & Marchbanks, 2008). As a result, career employees working in federal agencies may experience frequent turnover in the senior ranks, as well as potentially significant swings in policy priorities. As agency goals change to align with presidential agendas, career staff can face shifts in resource allocations that may have effects that outlast the administration itself.

In the scholarly research, politicization is generally represented through a ratio of either (1) an agency's total appointments to total overall staff or – more commonly – (2) an agency's total appointments to number of SES positions or equivalents (Limbocker et al., 2022). It is important to note that recent scholarship questions whether these ratios adequately capture the construct, which may reflect the focus primarily on senior career staff behaviors and attitudes in studies of politicization (Limbocker et al., 2022). These ratios also fail to reflect the indirect and cumulative effects of appointments. The time-boundedness of appointed leaders often leaves minimal time or energy to consider issues in federal agencies that do not contribute directly or immediately to specific policy goals. The constant turnover inherent in an appointed leadership base can negatively affect goal achievement, especially if the new leaders are brought in from outside the organization

(Hill, 2005). This can be somewhat moderated when those leaders are more familiar to the organization or enter with recognizable subject matter expertise (Boyne & Dahya, 2002).

Some researchers have examined the effects of politicization on the federal workforce; however, the civil service, as a whole, has received minimal attention in regard to their attitudes or behaviors in response to politicization efforts (Bolton et al., 2021). Scholars have previously explored effects of various factors on civil service attitudes (e.g., turnover intention) and behaviors (e.g., voluntary separation); however, these studies tend to concentrate on intrinsic factors (Edey Gamassou, 2015), organizational interventions (Cho & Lewis, 2012), or managerial behaviors (S. Y. Kim & Fernandez, 2017; G. Lee & Jimenez, 2011). These relationships are important, as the successful execution of federal laws and policies – the "service delivery" of the federal government – relies on a productive, active civil service possessing positive attitudes towards their work and organizations, but study findings suggest there are additional, though less recognized, influences (Albrecht & Travaglione, 2003; J. Pfiffner et al., 2012).

It is reasonable to assume that the members of the non-senior career ranks also experience, to some degree, negative responses to politicization through appointments as their SES colleagues do, suggesting a potential – and under-investigated – explanation for performance declines. Regardless of sector, worker attitudes directly impact both performance and turnover intentions (Park, 2012; Selden & Brewer, 2000; Wushe & Shenje, 2019; Zhang et al., 2014). Direct examinations of government employee turnover behaviors tend to focus on relationships between attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction or

intrinsic motivation) and self-reported intentions to quit (Caillier, 2011; Cho & Lewis, 2012; Cooper et al., 2014b). However, research confirms that, in general, civil service employees have much lower quit rates than comparable roles in the private sector (Feldman, 2005; Ippolito, 1987; S. Y. Lee & Whitford, 2008; Pitts et al., 2011). Cho and Lewis (2012) observe that the reported rate of *intention* to quit among federal employees far outweighs the number who actually do so. The aforementioned 2021 report of high levels of turnover intention among foreign service officers is contradicted by data from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management showing voluntary separations did not increase in the year following the survey (OPM, 2022). If public-sector employee attitudes are negatively influenced by political appointments yet those employees choose to remain in their roles, they risk becoming disengaged from their organization and their role within it. As a result, they may simply go through the motions of their jobs, thereby damaging their– and, by extension, their agency's – ability to achieve their public-service missions.

Summary

This chapter began with an examination of three sets of workplace attitudes: organization-based; role-based; and individual-based. These were framed through the concept of employee engagement, which, following Kahn (1990), is conceptualized as an employee's relationship with their organization as a whole. Dissatisfied or disengaged employees can have an outsized effect on organizational performance akin to the proverbial rotten apple spoiling the barrel (Meier & Hicklin, 2008). The literature presented explores the factors that influence employees' stay vs. leave decisions both generally and specifically in the public sector. Many of these studies point to employee attitudes towards their roles, workplaces, and organizations as important contributors to

both turnover intention and, importantly, other work-focused attitudes and behaviors. As attitudes can be connected to organizational performance through their relationship with workplace behaviors, it is critical that scholars and leaders understand the factors that can contribute to those views.

The chapter also explored the prevailing scholarly understanding of the three bases of attitudes as demonstrated by the interrelated attitudes of employee engagement, job satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation. It defined each of these terms, including how they diverge from each other, and described the visible results each can engender in organizations. Literature discussing the factors and dynamics that can contribute to or inhibit the development of each attitude, including the influence of organizational leadership, through both the behaviors of individual leaders and the way in which leadership is handled more broadly within an organization, was presented, along with a discussion of various methods scholars employ to measure attitudes, including the inherent challenges of differentiating between similar constructs.

This review then turned to a broader examination of the leader's role in fostering and sustaining constructive workplace attitudes. Specifically, it focused on the importance of the formation of trust between the leader and organizational follower, which is significantly influenced by the perceptions of followers about the leader's motives, integrity, capability, and alignment with organizational norms and values. Leader behaviors that contribute to the development of trust-based bonds in the organization were explored, including those common to all organizations, such as respect for follower contributions and clear communication, as well those more closely associated with public-sector organizations, like a service orientation or embrace of

hierarchical bureaucracy. Finally, the chapter transitioned to an examination of politicization through appointments with an overview of the motivations, goals, and options for politicization at the federal level and a summary of the organizational dynamics tied to appointments in those organizations. Several such elements were discussed, including structural and interpersonal factors, that can contribute to challenges in the appointee-careerist relationship. The chapter then concluded with an overview of key factors that influence appointee selection and the challenges scholars encounter in measuring politicization through appointments.

Three critical conclusions emerge from the scholarship discussed in this review. First, employee attitudes about their role, their employer, and their place within the organization are related to the behaviors they demonstrate in the workplace. The degree and nature of that relationship may vary between individuals and even for a particular worker over time, but the literature is clear about the connection between attitudes and actions. Second, those in positions of authority may contribute to some of those attitudes through how their own words and actions are perceived by their workers. Those perceptions are themselves influenced by the level of trust that exists in the leader-follower dyad and for which the leaders carry the burden of developing. Importantly, the literature does not limit these dynamics to for-profit companies, making it is reasonable to expect them to occur similarly in public-sector organizations. However, this conclusion reveals a gap in the extant literature when applying these two inferences to public-sector organizations that is illuminated by the third conclusion: the persistent use of political appointments to fill leadership roles in government may result in leader behaviors that undermine the development of trust in the leader and, by extension, the

organization itself. This final conclusion gets to the very heart of this study and the research questions it attempts to answer, as it moves beyond the behaviors of specific appointees to probe the potential relationship between a system that relies on organizational outsiders to provide the highest level of leadership.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The central question for this study focuses on how organization-level factors in public-sector agencies, including structures, processes, policies, etc., may contribute to the attitudes of the members who comprise them. To explore these dynamics, I undertook a qualitative approach grounded in reflexive thematic analysis, which joins together the voices of the men and women who served in one federal agency with my unique, subjective vantage point. Through this process, I identified several key themes that may help us understand the behaviors and attitudes of these organizational members in relation to their experience of leadership within their agency.

This chapter will provide an overview and discussion of my underlying research philosophy and the factors that led me to choose a reflexive analytical approach. This philosophy is centered I also present my theoretical framework, which centers on the bidirectionality of the leader-follower relationship, the trust on which that relationship depends, and how certain organizational factors can potentially impede development of that trust. I then connect this framework to the factors influencing my choice of research design, which is described in detail in Chapter 4. These decisions flow from my research question and my conclusion that a qualitative approach situated the rich language of the participants within their organizational contexts yields more depth and allows for greater exploration of nuance for my analysis.

Research Philosophy

In determining the underlying research philosophy for this study, I focused on the primary goal of the research itself, which was to understand the interpersonal dynamics

and behaviors of organizational members (career civil servants) in a particular context (the U.S. Department of State). The research problem involves complex phenomena that requires deep probing to elicit and distinguish them from similar dynamics. Evaluating and interpreting these phenomena also necessitates considering them within the larger organizational environment in which they occur. Therefore, I took an interpretivist approach to my analysis of the data collected through this study; specifically, I applied Blumer's (1969) principles of symbolic interactionalism that frames meaning through an individual's perception or understanding of their circumstances.

Blumer conceived of "symbolic interactionalism" as encompassing three fundamental principles: (1) individuals act towards things and people based on the meanings they associate with those items or other individuals; (2) those meanings arise from the interactions between themselves and others; (3) humans manage – and sometimes change – those meanings by a process of interpretation they employ to make sense of the world around them (Blumer, 1962). In this conception, people use these ongoing social interactions to understand their surroundings and the behaviors of others within those environs. While this process is necessarily individualistic and fluid, through the lens of symbolic interactionalism a theoretical framework emerges that views a society as the summation of the everyday interactions of many individuals. When applied to a particular societal context, such as an organization, it is possible to identify dynamics or elements that may shape the meanings organizational members associate with other members reflecting or affected by the socio-cultural realities of the organization itself.

Symbolization is a critical factor in this interactionalism as it encompasses all of the processes through which an individual connects the components of their environment

with particular meaning. Snow, in building on Blumer's original three principles, offers an important limiter to what some scholars have interpreted as a continuous process of making sense of the social world, asserting that these assumptions "fail to recognize the extent to which symbols and the meanings they convey are often, perhaps routinely, embedded in and reflective of existing cultural and organizational contexts and systems of meaning" (2001, p. 371). The socialization that members undergo when joining an organization, therefore, can contribute to the ways those members interpret others' behaviors, even in ways the members themselves do not recognize or appreciate. These social frames "are a central part of culture and are institutionalized in various ways" that must be taken into consideration when evaluating an individual's description of their own attitudes (Goffman, 1981, p. 63).

Snow's extension of Blumer's conception of symbolic interactionalism adds a fourth "anchoring principle" of human agency, which he defines as the "active, willful character of human actors" (2001, p. 373). In other words, organizational members are not blank automatons that simply subscribe to beliefs about other members based on organizational contextual dictums. Instead, the meanings they associate are the product of viewing the social frames through their own unique lens tinted by personal experience, disposition, and subjective preferences. Members of a collective, such as an organization, naturally form shared frames, too, and socialization of new members involves orienting them towards these structural "realities." To appreciate an individual's understanding of what they experience in their organization, it is important to recognize that individuals employ both their own and the collective frames in the process of assigning meaning to those encounters. Therefore, true understanding by the observer comes through capturing

and evaluating their interactions, whether "actual, virtual, or imagined" (Snow, 2001, p. 369).

The utility of Blumer and Snow's framework of symbolic interactionalism is clear in attempts to draw generalizable conclusions from individual perceptions. This study concerns employee attitudes about their organization and how various elements of that organization may influence those attitudes. As Gandz and Murray (1980) demonstrate, organizational member attitudes are often highly subjective, requiring the researcher to apply similarly subjectivity to recognize and interpret observed dynamics effectively. While this can suggest a sort of individualism associated with the reported effects or impacts of the phenomenon under study, these differences – when viewed cumulatively – can suggest predictable patterns among relational groups, such as the workforce of a particular organization (Miller et al., 2012; Motowidlo et al., 2014). By applying a predominantly interpretivist lens, predicated on a symbolic interactionalist approach, to the study findings, I frame each individual participant's described reality within their own *experience* of that reality, and only then can I begin to posit the broader implications for their collective (organization).

The research problem at the center of this study involves complex phenomena that require context and deep probing to elicit and distinguish from similar dynamics. The inherent subjectivity of how an individual participant recognizes and interprets what they encounter when interacting with others in their organization suggests that effects and impacts of those experiences will be highly individualized. That does not mean that it is not possible to tease out patterns or themes from the expressed attitudes, reactions, and beliefs of the entire participant pool. Doing so requires acknowledging the likelihood of

subjectivity influencing *how* those attitudes, reactions, and beliefs develop or change, as well as my own subjectivity, which is based on both personal experience as a member of the same organization as the participants and the positions I took deriving from my social interactions during that period. I do not approach this study as an objective bystander; I was a career member of the foreign service and my time with the Department of State contributed heavily to my thoughts and opinions about its structure, operations, and leadership paradigms. However, that I am *not* an outside observer is valuable in the reflexive approach I apply to my analysis, as it acknowledges and – importantly – leverages that subjectivity to allow me to draw themes from the words of the participants themselves as filtered through lens of my prior status as organizational member. Applying the process explicated by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021), my intimate understanding of the State Department as a longtime insider deepens my ability to recognize and interpret the context and importance of the social interactions that contribute to participants' expressed attitudes. A deeper discussion of the reflexive thematic process as applied to this study is detailed in the next chapter on research design.

My interpretivist research philosophy directly influenced my choice of using semi-structured interviews to generate data. Such interviews are frequently employed by qualitative researchers, especially by those applying an interpretive method (Al Balushi, 2018). This is because the interviewer can situate the data within the interviewee's own perspectives and understand their lived experience through what they choose to share and how they choose to frame its context. This ability to connect responses to interviewer questions with the elements that may have contributed to their formation recognizes how

investigating the thoughts and actions of people differs fundamentally from explorations of life, as only humans "understand, give meaning and value to their environment and themselves" (Hammersley, 2012). Scheibelhofer (2023) argues persuasively that it is the qualitative interview – especially the semi-structured interview – that offers the best opportunity for the interpretive research as it "puts the interview partners at the core of the communicative act" resulting in "interview material that is rich in stories told and connections made at the free choice of the participants." Such interviews incorporate a flexible design allows both the researcher and the participant to take the lead in following particular data points so that the resulting "conversations reveal [the subject's] narrative constructions rather than gloss over them" (Charmaz, 2014). In short, semi-structured interviews offer the most adaptable method for the researcher to capture both the explicit words of the participant and the context needed to interpret them.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study lies in the intersection of two related concepts: the legitimacy of organizational authority and the bidirectionality of the leader-follower relationship. Both of these theories hinge on the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the organizational follower, a role which pulls much less attention in the scholarly literature than the organizational leader. However, two seminal voices, from the early years of organizational management research, Chester Barnard and Mary Parker Follett, underscore the criticality of the follower, especially the follower's perceptions of organization dynamics and relationships, in legitimizing real authority of individual leaders. While organization's can place an individual in a role with *positional* authority,

their ability to influence others' behaviors in the longer term requires more than mere title, position in the organizational hierarchy, or designation from higher-level leaders.

Follett is among the first to argue persuasively for the recognition of the authority derived from experience or expertise that naturally arises in organizations (Follett, 2011). She proposes that, rather than being unidirectional, relationships between organizational members, especially between leader and follower, are reciprocal in nature. Her work contradicts the prevailing belief of her time, held by many organizational leaders and those who studied them, that manipulation, coercion, and tight control of organizational power were key in obtaining desired outputs from workers. Follett's work highlighting the potent leadership of those who have the most knowledge or experience – regardless of official position – casts light on additional organizational dynamics that emphasize the mutual benefits possible in reciprocal relationships predicated on respect, shared understanding, and a collective approach to goal achievement.

Of course, many organizations, especially hierarchies, continue to associate authority with an individual's particular position in the organization. However, drawing from Barnard's (1938/1971) criteria detailed in his *Functions of the Executive*, we see that submission to authority must be voluntary, if only subconsciously, including in rigidly hierarchical organizations like U.S. federal agencies. Per Barnard, that obedience depends on the follower's judgment of the leader's alignment with the organization's goals and values/norms (1938/1971). To put this another way, the follower must *trust* the leader's motives; therefore, the development of that trust is critical to legitimating the leader's authority in the eyes of the organization's workforce. Indeed, trust is repeatedly cited by scholars as one of, if not *the*, most important dynamics in organizational

cohesion and performance (Albrecht & Travaglione, 2003; Clark & Payne, 1997; McAllister, 1995; Tyler & Degoey, 1995).

How, then, does a leader foster such trust? From the literature, it is possible to identify important elements, including open communications; embrace of the organization's mission, values, and goals in word and – more importantly – in deed; and inclusion of employees in organizational decision-making (Bouckaert, 2012; Clark & Payne, 1997; Gilbert & Tang, 1998; McManus & Mosca, 2015). For leaders who ascend to their roles from within organizations, their colleagues and subordinates can observe and judge the leaders' ability to demonstrate these behaviors as they move through progressively higher roles. However, when leaders are brought in from outside, there may be little to no opportunity to gauge their commitment to, and alignment with, the wider organization. In selecting outsiders for political appointments, presidents appear to depend on the rigid bureaucratic structures to ensure civil servant compliance with directives, even when they disagree on policy positions. Existing scholarship seems to call into question the validity of this assumption.

The challenge of fostering or strengthening trust in leadership among appointees may be further inhibited by the limited tenures of many appointees. In an examination of the relationship between nepotism and leader legitimacy, Kim and Moon (2021) find that time is an important mitigator of the negative influence of a perceived lack of merit in obtaining a leadership role. For political appointees, however, time is not on their side. Most appointments are limited to the tenures of the administration under which they are made unless extended, which effectively assigns an end date before an appointee even begins their work. Scholars also note the enduring problem of vacancies among

appointment positions, which are attributed to both a fraught confirmation process and high turnover rates among some appointees (Dull et al., 2012; Resh et al., 2020). Therefore, if perceptions of leader legitimacy are predicated on trust and a favorable opinion of that leader's alignment with organization norms and goals, many political appointees may be predestined not to succeed as agency leaders.

Putting together these two paradigms allows for speculation on leader-follower dynamics that may arise in organizations that persistently rely on outsiders to carry out key leadership functions. The first potential effect would be decreased levels of organizational trust driven by low trust of many of the individual leaders employees encounter during their tenure with the organization. That trust takes time to develop is a reality of human social interaction, so simply placing an individual in a position of authority may give them temporary power but does not negate the necessity of the follower judging them as worthy of their trust in the long term. The factors that can influence such judgments will necessarily vary among individuals and among the leader-follower dyads themselves, as some placed in leadership/authority positions are perceived more positively than others in comparison to those factors. Somewhat ironically, that variability justifies placing the responsibility for fostering and sustaining trust on the shoulders of the leader, because it is *their* claim to authority, and the performance of the organization they represent, that will suffer without it.

Another expectation for organizations led by outsiders is questioning of the legitimacy of the authority associated with the outsiders themselves. This conclusion comes from extending the arguments of Barnard and Follett about the nature of the leader-follower relationship and its reliance on the perceptions of the latter about the

former. If outsiders are generally viewed as operating out of alignment organizational norms, values, and culture, *and* organizational leaders are perceived as representatives (or even the embodiment) of the organization itself, it follows that members of an organization that repeatedly favors outsiders over insiders in its leadership functions will question the legitimacy of that leadership and the authority that it ostensibly wields. Rigidly hierarchical organizations that are oriented towards duty, consistency, and risk aversion, such as agencies in the federal government, rely on member recognition of and adherence to positional authority to ensure constancy of operations in an environment of predictable, cyclical changes. To operate effectively within such an organization, we would expect insiders, especially those who remain for the long term, to profess outwardly their acceptance of outsider authority, but we cannot ignore the potential for an internal conflict arising with the attitudes and dynamics described by Barnard et al. It is that very clash that this study aims to explore.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This chapter presents the methods I employed in conducting this research study and the rationales for decisions I made regarding the choice of agency, sampling strategy, and coding approach. It also describes the process I undertook in applying Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework to identify key themes from the resulting data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Underpinning these choices was my desire to employ a qualitative methodology using the framework of Blumer's (1969) conception of symbolic interaction. It was critical that I apply a method that allowed me to capture the specific words used to describe opinions and attitudes to elicit the meaning individual participants attached to them. Therefore, I chose to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews of participants drawn from one federal agency, the U.S. Department of State. Applying the same basic interview protocol to each interview would allow for comparison between participants, while the semi-structured format provided some flexibility to probe deeper in response to individual answers.

Following an overview of the organizational context of the State Department, I explain the purposive sampling strategy I used to identify and recruit potential participants, along with the iterative approach I applied to participant selection later in the study as earlier participants themselves began to recruit other potential participants in a snowball-like sampling effect. I then describe the theoretical foundations that informed the development of my interview protocol and the rationale for its structural design. While this study specifically examines the potential relationship between political appointments and career employee attitudes, the dynamic of interest concerns perceptions

of leadership within the State Department. Therefore, the interview protocol is oriented around exploring participant opinions about the leadership as experienced in the Department.

A description of the data collected during the interviews is presented, including delineation along several demographic lines. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the process applied for coding, grouping, and analyzing the resulting data. This includes multiple rounds of coding, using both inductive and deductive approaches, and a multi-step process for associating codes into thematic groups using Braun and Clarke's method of reflexive thematic analysis. Given my prior relationship with the organization in question, an analytical method that turned that connection and opinions into an advantage was a logical choice for this study. The chapter concludes with descriptions of the resulting four themes that I identified from the data: behaviors; organizational attitudes; leader traits; and political attributes. This section includes examples of codes that were included in each theme and how I understood those codes to connect with each other.

Research Approach

The emphasis of an organizational follower's *perception* of leadership was critical to interpreting the possible connection with workplace attitudes; therefore, eliciting relevant firsthand follower input was the main focus of my study design. I employed a qualitative design, augmented by a small amount of quantitative data analysis drawn from extant sources. This approach addressed the real challenge of capturing complex attitudes and differentiating them from related or adjacent outlooks or beliefs through commonly used quantitative methods such as surveys, controlled experiments, and even existing data set analysis (Alarcon et al., 2010; Bailey et al., 2017, Ben-Gal, 2022; Judge &

Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). While many scholars have employed these tools to measure and correlate workplace attitudes, quantitative approaches can be less effective when seeking deeper explanations of social behaviors (Zainal, 2007; McKeown, 2004).

Storytelling, on the other hand, can offer richer data for analysis by opening wider windows into the assumptions, experiences, and conclusions that contribute to participant responses. As Benjamin (1973) notes, "a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (p. 90). In recent decades, researchers have recognized storytelling as an effective method of qualitative research that can "help to explain the multilevel and dynamic perspectives in management studies" (Liu et al., 2012, p. 143). Storytelling is a natural outgrowth of the human experience, suggesting that its use as a research method can provide researchers with far greater understanding of not just *what* a participant thinks, feels, or believes, but *why* they do so (Lewis, 2011). Significantly, by eliciting participants' own stories, I was able to probe if, and to what extent, those thoughts, feelings, or beliefs have changed over time, thereby allowing me to identify potential contributory factors, such as those dynamics of interest in this study.

This qualitative approach aligned well with my interpretivist research philosophy. As the interpretive paradigm rests on the underlying belief that how individuals exist in their "social realities" is shaped by their own experiences, the experiences expressed to them by others, and the contexts in which they encounter others, individuals' behaviors are best understood when situated within those social contexts (Lumen, n.d.). By exploring participants' responses more deeply, I was able to capture a fuller picture of the dynamics that were influencing their attitudes, even if the participant was not conscious

of them. This was particularly useful when searching for potential patterns of influence or, conversely, testing my own hypotheses about relationships between various organizational factors and participant reactions across the entirety of the data set.

My choice to employ a reflexive thematic analytical method to the data accomplished two important goals. First, the iterative approach, with multiple rounds of coding and thematic groupings, supported the identification of patterns and themes among the data. In many cases, the resulting codes or themes reflected the words of the participants themselves, thereby providing insights into how participants understood the meanings they assigned to their experiences within the organization as developed through the social interactions described by Blumer, Snow, and other scholars. Second, the reflexive thematic analysis process detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) explicitly acknowledges and leverages the researcher's subjectivity. Reflexive thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke and other scholars note, is "fully embedded within the values of qualitative analysis" as it aims to "generate contextualized and situated knowledge" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4; Pope et al., 2006). While the themes identified through this study represent patterns of shared meaning among *these* particular participants, they may offer insights into dynamics occurring in the Department of State. Importantly, reflexive thematic analysis posits that researcher bias is a necessity, as the understanding that arises from the analytical process is itself inherently subjective. In conducting this study, I am not an objective observer, but intentional and careful application of a reflexive thematic approach allows me to use leverage that subjectivity to improve the outcomes of my analysis.

Organizational Context: Why Study the State Department

I chose to focus this study on the State Department for multiple reasons. First, State's distinctive structure with both its civil and foreign services offered potential avenues for differentiating between constructs that can seem similar to the observer. For example, as "job satisfaction" is a response to an individual's immediate work environment, I expected some variance in expressed attitudes between a civil service State employee, whose environment may stay stable for long periods of time, and an FSO who may serve as a consular officer in South America in one assignment and as a public affairs spokesperson in China in the next assignment. There are different hiring procedures for the civil and foreign services, as well as different pay structures and promotion criteria. While there are key differences between the civil and foreign service structures, all State employees serve under the same senior leadership and presidential administration. By focusing on a bifurcated agency, I hoped to elicit perspectives and attitudes that suggested the influence of various organizational factors, including response to political appointee leadership.

Another important facet of the Department's organizational structure was the "collapse" of layers that can occur between political appointees and newer/more junior career employees. This element most commonly occurs at the overseas embassies and consulates predominantly staffed by foreign service officers, though it can also happen in the "front office" of regional or functional bureaus in the Washington, DC, headquarters. Political appointees comprise 30-40% of U.S. ambassadors; the ratio fluctuates between and even during presidential administrations, reflecting their common placement in the most senior-level, policy-informing positions in federal agencies (U.S. House of

Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform, 2020). While an early-career employee in most federal agencies is unlikely to encounter a political appointee in person, much less interact with them in meaningful ways, at overseas missions, FSOs on their first tours frequently serve assignments as staff assistants, deputy spokespersons, or program control officers to ambassadors, career and political alike. At posts with smaller staffs, interactions with ambassadors can be frequent, including outside of the workplace. I anticipated that this unusual dynamic had the potential to amplify the response to appointee behaviors among career State employees, especially FSOs, from the very beginning of their careers.

Finally, as a former career foreign service officer (FSO), I had access to a broad network of potential study participants. Additionally, my ability to "speak State" enabled a deeper exploration during the interviews, as neither I nor the participants needed to provide context or explanation for many organizational dynamics. One of these forces – a career employee's "corridor reputation" among fellow State employees – directly contributed to some volunteers' decision to participate as they had encountered me in some way during my time with the Department; of the total participants included in the study, 10 (23.8%) were individuals with whom I had minimal personal contact while I was employed by the State Department, and nine (21.4%) I had never met or spoken with before they entered the study. However, my previous affiliation with State was an important factor for some in choosing to participate: several participants were willing to be exceptionally frank in their responses predicated on their belief in the potential value to the Department's leadership of the research as well as in my ability to protect their

anonymity in an organization where one's ability to secure assignments or promotions could be materially damaged by speaking out.

As the first organized department of the Cabinet, the U.S. Department of State ("the Department") has undergone several transitions since its inception in 1789 until, by the early twentieth century, its predominant function was the diplomatic execution of U.S. foreign policy and oversight of consular services, including the issuance of passports to U.S. citizens (Office of the Historian, 2023). In 1924, the Department went through a major transition when the Rogers Act merged the diplomatic and consular services into the Foreign Service, which consisted of a professional cadre of officers chosen through a rigorous examination process, thereby aligning processes more closely with the merit systems already in place in the broader civil service (Office of the Historian, 2023).

In the post-World War II era, the State Department and the Foreign Service grew significantly to support the higher demand for consular services and greater diplomatic engagement due to the United States' expanding involvement globally and the Cold War. However, the same period saw the formation of the National Security Council (NSC) through the 1947 National Security Act and significant growth in the influence of the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) in the post-war environment (Office of the Historian, 2023). As the second half of the twentieth century progressed, the State Department began to lose some of its earlier influence in the foreign policy process as various presidential administrations leaned more, to varying degrees, on their national security advisors, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the intelligence community than on the Secretary of State and the Foreign Service. As a result, the Department was often not prioritized in presidential budget requests to Congress so that, by the turn of the twenty-first century,

hiring had fallen behind the rate of attrition, with some years seeing little to no intakes of new foreign service officers (Davis, 2002). To address this, during the George W. Bush Administration, Secretary of State Colin Powell requested Congress provide significant additional funding to address hiring shortfalls, create a "training float" that would permit FSOs to participate in developmental training like career members of the Department of Defense, and allow the Department to upgrade its systems to include introduction of e-mail (Office of the Historian, 2023). Much of this request was granted but, after changes in administration, ongoing investment in growing and preparing the Foreign Service for the future of diplomacy was not always prioritized.

Today, the U.S. Department of State is divided into two services: the Foreign Service and the civil service, each with its own hiring mechanisms, pay and benefit schemes, and promotion structures (USDOS, 2023). The members of the civil service side of the Department are classified under the same General Service (GS) hiring rules as peers in other federal agencies and are paid according to the GS scale. The majority of civil service positions provide deep subject-matter expertise on issues ranging from nuclear proliferation to international fishing rights to passport issuance, along with administrative functions (USDOS, 2023). As of 2023, there were over 11,500 civil servants working for the State Department, predominantly in the D.C. metro area where the Department is headquartered. As civil servants, they are subject to the protections afforded under the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and overseen by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

The Foreign Service diverges from the civil service in several important ways, beginning with the hiring mechanisms. With rare exceptions, all foreign service officers

enter at the same level after a rigorous evaluation process with an average success rate of 2.5% (USDOS, 2023). FSOs are ranked according to the foreign service (FS) scale, which ranges from a low of FS-08 to FS-01, the most senior level before entry into the Senior Foreign Service, and, unlike their civil service colleagues, hold rank in their person so that they are paid according to their personal rank, not the rank assigned to the position they encumber (USDOS, 2023).

The Foreign Service workforce is further divided between foreign service generalists and foreign service specialists. Generalists choose a sub-area of specialty – a "cone" – when beginning the hiring process and are hired based on the projected need for junior officers in that cone. As of 2023, there are five cones from which to choose: (1) consular; (2) economic; (3) management; (4) political; and (5) public affairs (USDOS, 2023). While generalists typically fill several types of functions during their tenures (thereby living up to their titles as "generalists"), as they progress up through levels of increasing seniority, most will concentrate on roles classified as "in" their cone. Specialists, on the other hand, are hired for specific technical areas, such as information technology management, financial management, medical services, and security services. The specialist hiring process focuses on demonstrations of existing capability in the area of each specialty, and most specialties start at a lower compensation level on the FS scale than generalists (Department of State, n.d.2).

All foreign service officers, both generalists and specialists, are required to obtain tenure within five years of their entry to remain in the Foreign Service; FSOs are also subject to an "up-or-out" promotion process similar to that in the DOD with officers not promoted within set time limits separated from the service (USDOS, 2023). Promotion

potential is often viewed as completely dependent on the written opinions of a few senior officers, which can lead to FSOs' unwillingness to take unpopular stands or disagree with those officers for fear that their evaluations will suffer. This dynamic can reinforce the risk aversion that many officers believe the Department's leaders expect from its career ranks and socialization reinforces. As FSOs move up in grade, their roles take on greater responsibility for supervising personnel, managing projects, or liaising with host-country officials; therefore, the up-or-out system requires all FSOs to take on such roles whether they want to or feel they are ready for them as there is no option to "opt out" of the promotion process to remain at their current grade.

By statute, foreign service officers must serve the preponderance of their careers overseas at U.S. embassies and consulates in assignments that last from one to three years (USDOS, 2023). Initial assignments are made by Department personnel; however, starting with their third assignment, FSOs can pursue whatever position they prefer that is at their grade and for which they can convince the person responsible for selecting for that position that they are the best qualified. This process is fairly decentralized, with each bureau managing its own hiring during a pre-defined period of time. (Department of State, 2015). Much of the process is opaque and subject to significant influence by senior officers who can weigh in on behalf of their preferred candidates. Therefore, cultivating relationships with well-regarded senior officers or working directly for them in roles such as staff assistant are often seen as good strategic moves early in one's Foreign Service career.

These dynamics can help explain some of the reticence FSOs demonstrate at engaging in situations that could put them at odds with more senior career staff. The

comparatively small size of the Foreign Service and its reliance on peers' opinions in securing assignments and promotions can create an environment in which officers refrain from questioning or criticizing others' decisions and actions openly, even if doing so could result in better outcomes for themselves, their constituencies, or the Department's overall goals. This can be exacerbated by the Foreign Service's up-or-out system, which can force individual officers into positions of responsibility for which they feel unprepared or uninterested in filling, which can negatively affect both them and those they supervise. My challenge as a researcher was to create an environment in which career members of both the civil and foreign services felt comfortable enough to be candid in their responses while also assembling a pool of participants that covered a wide range of demographics. Fortunately, my tenure as an FSO gave me credibility among the participant pool; their trust in me as a former career employee led to freer discussion during the interviews, yielding richer data for my analysis.

Sampling Strategy

To maximize my ability to assemble a diversified participant pool, I used multiple non-random sampling methods, including purposive, stratified, and snowball sampling through several networks and affinity groups/associations to select subjects who fit into various demographic categories, focusing on those at the professional grades of GS-10 and above for civil service and FS-04 and above for foreign service. The initial participant pool consisted of a group of volunteers reached through my own networks among current and former State Department career employees, as well as broader networks connected through State Department-affiliated social media groups. In spring 2023, I issued a call for volunteers using IRB-approved language to former colleagues

through multiple channels, including emails, direct messages in social media platforms Facebook and LinkedIn, and postings to State-affinity groups on Facebook of which I was a member. These messages also included a request to share the call with others in recipients' own networks, should they feel comfortable doing so. That request resulted in several individuals contacting me during the open-call period (roughly February to April 2023) to express their interest in participating. In addition, at my request the Editor in Chief at the Foreign Service Journal, which is published by American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) and reaches a large foreign affairs audience, published a call for participants in their February 2023 edition. Through these efforts, the initial participant pool consisted of 53 individuals.

Using a feature in Microsoft Office Suite named "Microsoft Bookings," I created an interactive calendar through which participants could select a day, time, and form (in-person vs. virtual) meeting, then sent links to the 53 potential participants with a request to schedule themselves as convenient. I offered in-person interviews to those located in the greater Washington, DC metro area; ultimately only a few interviews were conducted in person, as most of the participants were physically located outside of the DC area or the United States entirely. For those working overseas, I ensured there were plenty of time slots available during their daytime hours to minimize inconvenience for participants. For virtual interviews, I used the Microsoft Teams application, which allowed for video and audio connection, along with the ability to record if the participant permitted me to do so. I also sent reminder emails one business day ahead of each scheduled interview, thanking the participant, reminding them of the link to the Teams application, and offering links to reschedule if their initially selected time was no longer

convenient. Some of the initial pool members scheduled interviews only to cancel later without rescheduling. A few of the initial volunteers never responded to my scheduling emails. The final study pool consisted of 42 participants with whom I successfully completed interviews.

Data collection encompassed a cross-sectional study taking place at a single point in time. I chose this approach to account for the many variables present among the participants. However, as noted above, the interview questions explored various periods of a participant's experience as a career employee of the State Department in which they were asked to reflect on their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and experiences throughout their tenure. A longitudinal approach was not feasible; however, specific efforts were taken to include participants from a wide range of tenures from less than five years to more than 30 years over various entry and/or exit years. The resulting final participant pool included multiple individuals who joined the Department in the 1980s and others who entered into service as recently as 2019.

The semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted virtually, though two were conducted in person, with both audio and video recorded in all but five cases (at the participants' request). Though most interviews were recorded, I took extensive notes throughout, which allowed me to discern emerging themes or patterns that I then incorporated into later interviews. For example, after noting several participants negatively comparing State's approach to training and leadership development to that of the Department of Defense, I explored this point in more detail with subsequent participants who had served in the U.S. military prior to joining the State Department. The use of interviews allowed for greater probing of participant responses, including the

opportunity to observe their non-verbal communication in conjunction with their stated responses. This method of collection also leveraged my "insider" status, as neither the participants nor I needed to provide context for the questions or the resulting responses, thereby allowing for a more free-flowing discussion yielding rich details. The interviews varied in length depending on the level of detail in responses and if any potentially useful discussion points arose.

Structure of Interview Protocol

To structure the interviews, I created a protocol of questions designed to probe attitudes, beliefs, and responses to leadership within State as experienced and perceived by the study participants; most of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, though a few went nearly 90 minutes as we explored certain responses in greater depth. In some cases, I posed additional questions based on a participant's particular perspective that may offer insights into dynamics either they or another participant raised. For example, after hearing several participants mention former Secretary of State Colin Powell when discussing leadership of the Department, I posed specific questions about his tenure with a participant who had served in high levels of responsibility under Secretary Powell.

My interview approach started with understanding the participant's "origin story": what led them to a career at State, why they chose that agency, what was their area of focus, and what did they expect their career to entail. We then transitioned to a more general discussion of what the participant wanted in a leader – the behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics that they associated with effective leadership. Once this "rubric" was established, we would then discuss what they had actually experienced with leadership in

the Department and what conclusions, if any, they drew from those experiences. Finally, we explored their opinions on political appointees, particularly in relation to those appointees filling leadership roles. My goal was to create areas of comparison between what a participant expected and actually experienced in their career generally and in leaderships specifically. I was particularly interested in how often they had encountered the types of behaviors and attitudes they associated with "effective" leaders and what they thought about that reality.

The interviews began with questions designed to allow development of a sketch of sorts for each participant, including their own motivations and opinions about the organization and their place within in it. The very first question asked participants to "tell me your origin story" – how they landed at the State Department and what they expected to find once there. They were also asked to give a brief summary of their role with the Department to-date; for foreign service members this entails a list of assignments and for civil service an explanation of the subject matter(s) with which they work most closely or functions they fill. Participants were also explicitly questioned about their *expected* career length when joining: did they view State as a steppingstone to other opportunities or did they plan to remain for the duration of their professional careers? Each of these elements could offer insight into internal motivations and expectations about both the organization and a participant's role within it. The approach was especially useful when, later in the interviews, we turned to what participants actually experienced and whether, or to what degree, that diverged from what they anticipated at the start of their tenures.

Questions then turned to leadership more generally – what characteristics and behaviors each participant values and, importantly, seek in their leaders, along with their

views on the general quality of leadership they have experienced while with the State Department. The goal was to create a profile of what constituted "good leadership" to participants by drawing together the most commonly cited traits, abilities, and behaviors participants associate with effective leaders. The interview protocol then focused on a specific set of leaders, including the Department's current senior leadership – comprised of the Secretary, deputy Secretaries, undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, and ambassadors, many of whom are non-career political appointees – along with their current and previous direct supervisors, and those specifically charged with overseeing operations at foreign service posts, such as ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission (DCMs). The aim was to create a second series of profiles that can be compared to the "good leader" paradigm and analyzed for areas of alignment and divergence. The results of those comparisons are in the next chapter, while discussion of potential explanatory factors and outcomes are laid out in Chapter 6.

The interview instrument began with questions designed to gauge participants' personal attitudes and beliefs about the State Department, its place in the national security ecosystem, and their expectations on entering federal service. Later questions returned to these themes to get a sense of each participant's perception of whether those attitudes or beliefs had changed and, if they had, what factors had influenced them. Participants were also given the opportunity to expand on any previous answers or volunteer thoughts on related topics through the final question, which asks:

> *Q12. Is there anything you would like to add, including any questions that you thought I might ask or topics I might raise and didn't?*

While most study participants responded to this question that they had expressed all they wanted, some commented that they were surprised that they were not asked more

questions, either directly or indirectly, about political appointees themselves or whether they "liked" them. In a few cases, participants then shared their thoughts more pointedly about political appointments or specific appointee behaviors. While these additional responses were useful in the overall analysis, they demonstrated the very dynamic I hoped to avoid through my interview structure. The behaviors of specific appointees can be fascinating and, in some cases, infuriating, depending on one's perspective, but there is healthy existing literature on these dynamics. My research questions lay in a different direction: specifically, probing whether a relationship existed between *structural* elements in this specific public-sector organization and the work-related attitudes of its career employees? By building these various leadership "profiles" at the State Department, I aimed to discern (1) if there were mismatches between what employees sought and what they actually received from their leaders (2), if so, whether the particular organizational aspects of political appointments contributed to these divergences.

Description of Interview Data

The final interview data for this study consisted of transcriptions of 42 semi-structured interviews conducted over an eight-week period between June 5 and August 2, 2023. All but two of the interviews were conducted virtually using the Microsoft Teams application; the remaining two interviews were conducted in person at the subject's residence. While the participating subjects were all current or former career members of the civil and foreign services at the U.S. Department of State, most were drawn from the U.S. foreign service (90.4%). The breakdown of individual relationship with the State Department is listed in figure 1.

Figure 1: Subject affiliation with U.S. Department of State

Total	**42**	**100%**
Foreign Service - Current	28	67%
Foreign Service - Former	10	24%
Civil Service - Current	3	7%
Civil Service - Former	1	2%

The participants represented a variety of demographic groups among the State Department's employee population. The first of these demographics established the period during which the participant joined the State Department by the participant selecting from eight five-year periods beginning with 1980-1984 and ending with 2015-2019. These start ranges covered nine and one-half presidential administrations:

- Reagan I (January 1981 - January1985);
- Reagan II (January 1985 – January 1989);
- H.W. Bush (January 1989 – January 1993);
- Clinton I (January 1993 – January 1997);
- Clinton II (January 1997 – January 2001);
- W. Bush I (January 2001 – January 2005);
- W. Bush II (January 2005 – January 2009);
- Obama I (January 2009 – January 2013);
- Obama II (January 2013 – January 2017); and,
- The first two years of the Trump Administration (January 2017 – December 2019).

In addition, the ranges overlap the tenures of ten and one-half Senate-confirmed Secretaries of State (Secretary Antony Blinken was confirmed on January 26, 2021, and remained in that role throughout the data collection and analysis period). During the same period, there were an additional nine Secretaries serving in an "acting" capacity between appointments of confirmed Secretaries, most of whom were career members of the U.S. Foreign Service (Department of State, n.d.1). The highest representation was in the 2005-2009 group, which aligned with the significant increase in foreign service hiring as part of the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative championed by former Secretary Colin Powell

(CITE). The distribution of participants by entry period into the Department is listed in figure 2.

Figure 2: Subject entry into the State Department, by five-year period

Start Period	42	100%
1980 - 1984	2	5%
1985 - 1989	1	2%
1990 - 1994	3	7%
1995 - 1999	1	2%
2000 - 2004	5	12%
2005 - 2009	19	45%
2010 - 2014	9	21%
2015 - 2019	2	5%

The U.S. foreign service is divided into two hiring categories for U.S. officers: generalists and specialists. The generalist ranks were further divided by the officer's chosen "cone" or area of concentration; as of 2023, there were five cones: Consular, Economic, Management, Political, and Public Diplomacy. However, during the period represented amongst the participant pool, there was another cone – Administrative – which was changed to Management in the early 2000s; in addition, the Public Diplomacy cone was added to the generalist ranks in 1999 when the now-defunct U.S. Information Agency was folded into the foreign service (Office of the Historian, n.d.).

During most of the covered period, foreign service generalists selected their preferred cone prior to entering service, typically when registering to take the foreign service officer test (FSOT). However, there were multiple brief periods during which the Department's leaders experimented with allowing officers to enter "unconed" and select their cone after achieving tenue, which occurs typically three to five years after entry. At least three of the study participants entered during one of these periods. While Department policy allowed for cone changes after entry, officers were counseled that

changes were not frequently granted; therefore, aspiring foreign service officers should "carefully consider" their cone selection. However, nearly a quarter (24%) of the study participants reported successfully undergoing "conal rectification" (the official term for the change process) during their tenures.

Foreign service officer specialists represented 13.1% of the participant group, divided among two specialties: office management specialists (5.2%) and diplomatic security special agents (7.9%). These specialties were among twenty different areas of specialization within the Department in the functional areas of administration; buildings construction, operations, and maintenance; information technology; educational and cultural affairs; law enforcement and security; and medical and healthcare (Department of State, n.d.1). Foreign Service specialist positions typically required demonstration of technical competency through prior professional experience and/or formal education and certification. Transition between Foreign Service specialist and generalist roles was not uncommon in the Department, particularly among office management specialists whose promotions were capped at the FS-03 level until recently (USDOS, 2023). The distribution of foreign service officer participants by cone or specialty is listed in figure 3.

Figure 3: Distribution of FSO participants by cone or specialty

All	**38**	**100%**
Generalist Cones		
Management	6	16%
Consular	3	8%
Political	13	34%
Economic	6	16%
Public Diplomacy	5	13%
Specialties		
Office Management	2	5%
Diplomatic Security Special Agent	3	8%

While tenure lengths were not measured among study participants, their relative seniority in the Department at the time of the study (for current members) or at separation (for former members) was self-reported. The career civil service employees in the participant pool, like civil servants in other federal agencies, were classified according to the Office of Personnel Management's general schedule (GS) based on the grade assigned to the position they encumbered; for the study participants, classifications ranged from GS-12 to GS-15, the highest classification before the Senior Executive Service ranks, with one participant at each of the four levels (OPM.gov, n.d.). Foreign service officers – both generalists and specialists – were classified according to the foreign service (FS) personnel system; in the FS system, the numbers decreased as an officer ascends the ranks so that an FS-01 was the highest rank before entry into the Senior Foreign Service (SFS). Each foreign service participant's rank (either currently or on separation) ranged from FS-05 to the SFS, with the largest segment at the middle ranks of FS-03 and FS-02. The distribution of foreign service officer grades is listed in figure 4.

Figure 4: Distribution of foreign service grades among study participants

Foreign Service Grades	**38**	**100%**
FS-06	0	0%
FS-05	1	3%
FS-04	2	5%
FS-03	10	26%
FS-02	13	34%
FS-01	5	13%
Senior Foreign Service	7	18%

From the demographic information provided by the participants, it was possible to construct an "average" profile of those comprising the study as a tenured foreign service generalist with 10-15 years of experience, encompassing between five to seven separate

assignments predominantly in a political or economic reporting role. However, the participant pool included four current or former ambassadors, some of whom served as bureau assistant secretaries, principal deputy assistant secretaries, or deputy assistant secretaries. The specialists among the study volunteers represented most of the lower grades, which reflected the reality that many specialties started lower on the FS scale than others, such as medical providers, as well as generalists, who began the tenured stage of their careers at the FS-04 level by policy.

Data Coding and Analysis

As Braun and Clarke note, effective codes and themes result from the researcher both immersing themselves engagements with participants and allowing for some "distance" while developing their analysis (2021, p. 7). What follows is a description of the process I undertook in coding and analyzing the data collected from 42 current and former career State Department employees. It involved multiple rounds of coding, associating, and identifying themes that took place over several months, allowing me to reflect on both the words participants used and the meanings they conveyed, intentionally or otherwise. These personal accounts helped me understand participants' attitudes but with some inherent costs. No two researchers will code the same data set exactly the same way, and, while a reflective thematic approach accounts for this variation, it is inevitable that some meaning will be overlooked. However, maintaining participants' words and context within my coding process provides support for the central claims of pattern derived from my examination of their expressed attitudes.

Interviews were transcribed first by TranscribeMe!, an internet-based transcription software (www.portal.transcribeme.com). I then conducted a line-by-line

review for accuracy. With the exception five participants who wished not to be recorded, I was able to confirm any unintelligible segments by reviewing or listening to the associated recording. For the interviews in which the participants did not consent to recording, I created a mock transcript from notes taken during the interview, adding a notation at the beginning of each indicating how it was generated. The transcripts were then subjected to two rounds of coding using the Delve qualitative data analysis software (www.delvetool.com). The first round employed a deductive approach using codes drawn from the pre-study literature review and theoretical framework. These 26 initial codes included descriptors of workplace attitudes, such as commitment, leader trust, or service orientation, and common leadership attributes or behaviors, such as communication, transparency, and integrity drawn from the scholarly literature. A full list of the first-round codes is included in Appendix II.

Throughout the first round of coding, I generated a running list of terms describing participant attitudes, motivations, assumptions, and recurring references to particular workplace dynamics. From this list, I created a second set of codes to use during a second round through an inductive approach. In many cases, I created *in vivo* codes to capture not just what a subject or group of subjects experienced, but *how* they chose to articulate their experience of it. The inductive round consisted of a much closer read than the deductive round to ensure each response was considered on its own as well as in context with the broader interview. Again, the coding took place in the Delve analysis software, which allowed me to see in real-time how frequently certain codes were applied. During this process, I began to group the codes into four general themes to

differentiate between those elements that were observed, presumed, or associated with either of these. The four thematic groups were:

1. Behaviors: those actions outwardly detected or perceived by organizational members
2. Org Attitudes: attitudes centered around organizational dynamics and relationships
3. Political Attributes: descriptions of or references to dynamics associated with the use of political appointments
4. Leader Traits: internal capabilities, beliefs, attitudes, etc. that may or may not be outwardly detectable (i.e., attribution may be based on the viewer's assumptions)

First round codes focused on highlighting the phenomena I expected to hear described based on the extant literature and the anecdotal experience of career Department employees in my professional network. These anticipated phenomena formed the basis for the planned interview questions, which was structured to begin with a participant's motivation in joining the Department then establish their more general beliefs about leadership, including what characteristics and behaviors make for "good" or "effective" leadership in their eyes. Later questions then probed the subject's opinions about the overall quality of leadership they experienced as a career employee before focusing on specific categories of leaders, including political appointees. The initial deductive round revealed a great deal of variance among participants in how they interpreted the questions, how much their responses were influenced by their personal expectations, and the relative level of importance they attached to the dynamics of interest. Therefore, the inductive approach to the second round of coding allowed for the capture of more nuance to reflect the richness of the responses along with some (sometimes surprising) common references. The second-round codes and the associated thematic groups are listed in Appendices III and IV, respectively.

Using the data resulting from the 42 interviews, I undertook two formal rounds of coding followed by a "theming" round during which codes describing certain themes were grouped together. For the first round, a list of 26 codes were generated from the research question and resulting hypotheses. These focused predominantly on either behaviors, characteristics, or attitudes associated with dimensions of leadership, organizational commitment, engagement, job satisfaction, and personal motivation. Some of the codes, such as "motives," "control," and "experience," described individualized attitudes or behaviors, such as whether a study participant valued or expected a leader to have relevant experience or how they described their own motives for joining the State Department.

A number of the first round, deductive codes were drawn directly from how the scholarly research conceptualizes a workplace attitude or, importantly, differentiates a particular attitude from other similar dynamics. For example, from Bertelli's (2006) description of personal motivation as driven either task or mission orientation, along scholars' emphasis on mission centrality for public service motivation (Bozeman & Su, 2015; Perry & Wise, 1990), codes were developed, such as "commitment," "join motive," and "mission orientation," to capture descriptions of individual participants' own attitudes. Related codes were used to mark when participants discussed their presumptions about others' (usually leaders') attitudes, such as "organizational alignment" (beliefs about leaders or members sharing a common mission or vision) and "service orientation" (beliefs about others' desire to serve the public good more generally). Interestingly, only one pre-determined code – "neutrality" – was not applied in any round of coding, suggesting that the list included descriptors appropriate for the

resulting data. That nearly all of the deductive codes apply repeatedly to the data suggests that a good connection between the organizational dynamics I could expect based on the prevailing literature and what participants actually described. Among the 26 deductive codes, the average number of times they were applied to the 42 transcripts was 40.2, with a range of four to 151 applications. A full list of the deductive codes, with definitions, is included in Appendix II, and a list including the number of times each code was applied to a transcript is included in Appendix IV.

Through the close reading of the first, deductive round of coding, other dynamics began to emerge for which additional codes were created for subsequent rounds. Many of these described factors more specific to the State Department, such as changes to one's assigned cone, the effects of time-limited assignments, and an organizational culture that expects – and rewards – risk aversion. Many of these supplementary codes dealt more directly with phenomena associated with political appointments, such as "politicization," "resources" (describing an appointee's ability to marshal resources for the organization), and former Secretary of State Colin Powell as the archetypal leader. Other codes expanded upon the original list of descriptors of leader behaviors or attitudes, such as "emotional intelligence," level of influence both inside and outside the Department, and "accountability." In all, 25 new codes were added to the deductive list, almost doubling the total number of codes. A full list of inductive codes is including in Appendix II.

The inductive codes were applied to each transcript in a line-by-line reading session. In addition, some of the deductive codes were further used in conjunction with some inductive codes for a more nuanced notation. For example, the deductive code "respect," which references "valuing all organizational members for their abilities,

contributions, and membership" was augmented by the inductive code "emotional intelligence," designating a leader's ability to relate to others with empathy. Combining the codes narrowed the focus to leaders and, specifically, to employment of empathy when demonstrating respect to followers. The former speaks to motives – something that is essentially invisible and therefore subject to presumption – while the latter is observable as a behavior. By using them together, I could highlight participant examples of both *what* they saw a leader do and their belief about *why* the leader acted that way.

To interpret the patterns and themes arising from the multiple coding rounds, I employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). An important element of reflexive thematic analysis is the need for the researcher to engage both critically and reflexively with themselves by posing questions while reading and interpreting the data. Braun and Clarke (2021) propose that these reflexive questions challenge the researcher's initial reactions to the data, moving away from mere examinations of *what* was said to explore *why*, *how*, or in response to *what* (pp. 43-44). As they characterize it, this approach acknowledges – and explicitly values – the role and importance of the "subjective, situated, aware, and questioning researcher" in effective qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4). Given my own experience and ongoing connection with the organization from which the study participants are drawn, I was aware of the risk of my own bias or lack of objectivity influencing the study outcomes. Through reflexive thematic analysis, particularly as articulated by Braun and Clarke's approach, I was able to turn that subjectivity into a useful analytical tool. Importantly, the themes that emerged from my analysis resulted from my "systematic engagement with…the dataset," and, therefore, derive benefit from my connection with the Department (Braun & Clarke,

2021, p. 9). For this analysis, I followed the six-part process laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021), which immersed me in the data, thereby allowing me to identify both themes and patterns of meaning from the dataset by applying my own unique lens to it.

Applying this approach to the interview data, I began grouping codes together with those associated with statements/responses that described similar attitudes, beliefs, or concepts and gave them descriptive titles, such as "relationships with outsiders" or "understanding State and its processes." I then used a white board and set of movable self-stick blocks (similar to repositionable notes), writing one title on each block and placing it on the white board. I then drew arrows to connect blocks that, based on the snippets associated with each code, suggested relationships between two or more of the codes. After completing this process, I rearranged the blocks so that relationships, and the directions they took (i.e., which block "contributed" to the other block), were laid out more clearly, especially those blocks with multiple connections or that were part of chains of connections. For example, the block "time-boundedness" contributed to the "understanding State and its processes" block, which contributed to the "leader quality" block.

I then evaluated the layout of blocks again, looking specifically for any that had no connections, seemed duplicative of another block (by having the same connections), or was at the center of many connections. Those with no connections or that seemed to describe a similar relationship were removed from the board. The resulting relationships coalesced around four thematic areas. The first grouping included those codes that referred to "behaviors" – those actions that can be outwardly detected or perceived by organizational members. Many of these codes referenced actions taking place between

leader and follower, such as “communication,” “decision_making,” and “collaboration.” While the codes generally describe observable dynamics, they could also incorporate inferences by the observer. For example, the code “priorities” was defined as “references to prioritization of organizational dynamics by internal leaders and/or external stakeholders.” Many of the points in transcripts that were coded with the “priorities” tag described perceived prioritization of certain policy agenda items over others. In some cases, the observer (here, the study participant) was privy to explanations for why one item was raised over another, but in other cases, the observer had to infer the rationale. Several of the codes included under the “behaviors” theme had this dual element, such as “empowerment,” “expectations,” and “risk_aversion.”

The behavioral codes contrast with the second grouping of “organizational attitudes” that is comprised of codes describing attitudes of both members and leaders. In applying those codes, it was important to differentiate between those characterizing the participants themselves, of which they may or may not be aware, and those ascribed to others, especially leaders, which derived from assumptions about attitudes based on observed behaviors. The “org attitudes” group included attitudes that centered around organizational dynamics and interpersonal relationship among any and all organizational members, as well as the organization itself, such as “organizational trust” and “organizational justice.” Others described factors that contributed to join, stay, and/or leave decisions, such as “commitment,” “service_orientation,” and “goal_achievement.” Discussions with study participants that were coded with these and similar tags tended to explore either the participant’s own orientation towards these concepts or their belief

about the organization's expectation of its members in relation to the codes; sometimes these aligned but, in several cases, they diverged to varying degrees.

As many of the interview questions probed opinions and experiences with leadership, including political appointees, a third group of "leader traits" brought together the codes for various characteristics, abilities, or behaviors associated with leadership within the State Department, both good and bad. Like some of the codes in the "behaviors" grouping, the "leader traits" collection focused on internal factors that might or might not have been outwardly detectable but were associated with observed actions. An example of this was the code "respect," which noted perceptions that a leader valued all organizational members for their abilities, contributions, and membership within the organization or subunit. In some cases, participants described circumstances in which they or others felt respected by their leaders. In other instances, however, a participant might attribute a particular behavior, such as failing to include them in decision-making, to a lack of respect by the leader whether that was actually the reason their contribution was not solicited. Therefore, there could be a great deal of variability in interpreting the importance or underlying meaning of some statements as both the observable action/outcome needed to be considered in conjunction with the leader's intent that may or may not be inferred accurately by the observer.

The final thematic coding group, "political attributes," includes the smallest number of associated codes with five. This was in keeping with the framing of the potential negative effects on recognized organizational dynamics as an outcome of a particular structural element: i.e., politicization through appointees. Only one of the five codes associated with the grouping was generated as part of the deductive code list,

referring to time boundedness as a sense of limits on the time available to an appointee to accomplish their work. The other codes arose during the initial coding round as specifically relevant to political appointments, such as engagement with Congress or the ability to access resources out of reach to career officials. While the approach to discussions of political attributes was less direct than other elements, such as leader qualities, all five of the codes were applied frequently, with a mean usage of 23.8 times over the dataset. As I designed the study to view many of the dynamics through a leadership lens, many of the phenomena described by participants were most closely aligned with the other three groupings, especially that of "leader traits." However, some participants touched on elements that are associated most closely the public sector and differed from other the behaviors, attitudes, or traits discussed in the interviews.

Summary

This study incorporated the thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of 42 men and women who have served at some point in the professional lives as career members of the U.S. Department of State. These volunteers participated in semi-structured interviews designed to probe their attitudes related to the Department, their role within it, and – most specifically – the quality of leadership they experienced as members of it. Questions were designed to establish a baseline of preferred leader traits and behaviors, then apply it to certain leader subsets, such as political appointees. The resulting data was transcribed and subjected to multiple rounds of both deductive and inductive coding. The coded extracts were grouped into thematic areas based on shared characteristics, which were then evaluated using a reflexive thematic analysis to generate patterns and themes for further interpretation.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Introduction and Overview of Major Themes

The completed interviews yielded a tremendous amount of data for analysis, from which, after the coding process, four distinct thematic areas emerged. The following chapter will present these in detail, often using the participants' own words to convey the opinions, reactions, and beliefs on which I based my analysis. Two of the four themes coalesced around the interrelated concepts of behaviors and attitudes of organizational members. The other two concerned traits or attributes associated with two organizational groups: leaders and political appointees. Within each of these themes were multiple sub-themes that focused on associations with particular organizational dynamics both observed and assumed. Importantly for this study, many of the data points describe conclusions or beliefs participants associate with these dynamics as well as what factors contributed to their formation. Evaluating both what a participant thought in conjunction with their understanding of why they thought it enabled robust analysis and development of the conclusions about the relationship between political appointments and career employee attitudes at State discussed in the next chapter.

The first thematic area focuses on behaviors, those actions that are outwardly detectable or perceived by the study participants and from which they draw conclusions about their fellow organizational members and themselves. These include two significant sub-themes regarding behaviors associated with organizational decision-making and those associated with relationships between organizational members. Within the data describing behaviors and decision-making, three important dynamics were highlighted:

control (both real and perceived); risk tolerance and aversion; and empowerment. Participants shared opinions both about the behaviors they associate with those dynamics based on their experience while at State as well as more normative beliefs about how those dynamics should be reflected in workplace conduct. The second sub-theme focused on three organizational dyads and the behaviors participants linked to them. Two were particular to the organizational setting for the study: relations between members of the foreign service and the civil service, and between career and non-career (appointee) employees. The third described behaviors associated with the leader-follower dyad as experienced in the State Department.

Intermingled with the participants' thoughts on leader-follower relationships at State were descriptions of behaviors and traits they associated with leaders and leadership more generally. These included the internal capabilities most frequently raised in connection with participants' beliefs about effective leadership, including emotional intelligence, capability, integrity, respect, humility, and the ability to influence the organizational environment, both internally and externally. This second thematic area also includes participants' assumptions about the attitudes and beliefs that they believed motivated or otherwise explained why those in leadership positions behaved in particular ways. Delving deeper, the interviews revealed how participants responded to the leadership behaviors they encountered within the Department and, importantly, the broader conclusions they drew from those experiences. In particular, many participants described attitudes they had formed about the Department regarding how it prepares both career and non-career employees to assume leadership roles and the effects on leadership quality and other organizational dynamics they attributed to that approach.

While the second thematic area focuses on leadership traits and behaviors, the third encompasses discussions of organizational attitudes more generally, including those of the participants themselves and those they perceived in others. Unlike behaviors, which can be observed, the thoughts and feelings that drive those behaviors are not readily apparent; therefore, much of the discussion within this theme centers on assumptions or beliefs participants formed based on what they saw or experienced. These include motivations for joining and remaining with the organization, as well as embrace of the organization's underlying mission, for both them and others, especially political appointees. Differences between their expectations of the organization and their role within it versus their lived realities was another data-rich topic with important implications for organizational commitment and long-term stability. A third, and perhaps most critical, set of traits and behaviors within this thematic area centered on trust and commitment, both of leaders and, by extension, the organization itself.

The final thematic area highlighted participants' thoughts about the dynamics within the State Department specifically associated with political appointments and the individuals who fill them. Several effects of this particular form of politicization arose, including opinions about appointee qualifications, the effects of relationships between appointees and the White House, and perceived trends in the use of appointments. While some participants' comments in this theme touched on lingering effects they associated with recent administrations, others pointed out that these undercurrents exist to varying degrees regardless of who occupies the Oval Office. Even more striking was the sense from many participants that these effects, most of which were considered to be deleterious, were increasing, leading to gaps in the policy guidance and leadership needed

throughout the Department. Opinions about individual appointees were mixed, with some pointing pragmatically towards the benefits of appointees' political or financial connections, while others described inherent barriers to effective performance created by outsiders confronted by steep learning curves with a clock running from the start of their tenures.

Because the interview protocol was designed to approach the question of how the system of political appointments at the State Department might contribute to career employee attitudes from different angles, the resulting data often included comments that could be associated with more than one of these four themes. Many of the individual responses were assigned codes that were ultimately grouped into different thematic areas, reflecting the underlying interrelation of the four. My analysis, therefore, considered both the words a participant used and the meaning I interpreted from them based on the context of the particular question to which they were responding as well as their other comments in the interview more broadly. As each thematic area is described more fully in this chapter, the participants' words are included as examples of the foundations for my conclusions as well as exemplars of how the dynamics I highlighted were characterized by participants themselves.

Behaviors

Behaviors associated with organizational decision-making

The first of the four major themes to emerge from the dataset concern a set of behaviors associated with various aspects of the State Department, its operations, its members, and most directly, its leadership, both appointed and career. Within this grouping are behaviors that participants connected with decision-making by Department leaders, specifically control, risk tolerance/aversion, and empowerment of followers,

including allowing their contributions to decision-making processes. Descriptions of control among leaders, and the outcomes when that control was inhibited or diminished, arose in response to several questions, particularly those asking about the dynamics that they believed could influence Department members' ability to achieve its mission, either internally or externally. Several participants expressed their belief that the State Department's senior leadership has minimal control over that ability in the specific areas of agenda-setting and securing sufficient resources to execute on that agenda. As one longtime officer in the senior foreign service (FSC29) characterized it:

> *The DC political scene dictates what we can and can't do, especially the Hill [Congress]. We have to contend with whatever has upset or grabbed the attention of the Hill. Also, any dysfunction on both the Hill and in the White House. Since COVID, people have forgotten how to work or talk with each other, and it's getting close to debilitating. The influence of the personalities in the White House and the NSC [National Security Council] dictate our abilities.*

Another participant, a mid-career foreign service generalist, agreed, noting that "the amount of money that funds the Department of State is ultimately controlled through processes far outside the control of even the Secretary of State" (FSC27). The ability to influence funding at the Department was a common theme among the highest-ranked of participants, with the majority of comments on control coming from participants ranking at the FS-01 and senior foreign service levels, suggesting that recognition of this dynamic and understanding its implications are more associated with longer tenures or greater exposure to senior leadership. Of the participants who commented on such elements who were ranked FS-02 or below, all but one had served at least one tour in an office in which they directly engaged with senior-level leaders, such as the Executive Secretariat, the Operations Center, or a regional bureau front office.

While some participants commented on the level of control – or, more accurately, influence – of individual senior officials with both the executive and legislative branches, others attributed any lack of sufficient control to the structure of the Department itself and its place in the national security space, with some noting the perceived prioritization of the Department of Defense (DoD), NSC, and/or the intelligence community (IC) over the State Department in policy development and execution. A few attributed this dynamic more to partisan shifts, with a mid-level reporting FSO (FSC24) noting:

> *You never know whether it's because there's no budget, whether there's indecisiveness, whether there's somebody at some point blocking something, but also there's this whole thing that happens between Republican vs. Democrat administrations that I've noticed, and I started…under [President] George W. Bush.*

This perception was underscored by a mid-level public diplomacy FSO's (FSC12) comments on transitions between administrations:

> *It's funny because we always talk about when there's transition of power with elections and things like that, how our foreign policy is pretty consistent. But I feel like I have seen personalities drive a lot of it, which is surprising to me because I didn't think it would be that way.*

Other participants felt the Department's leadership held more control than it realized, or at least exercised, though it needed to do more to strengthen it, particularly relationships with Congress who, as one entry-level officer said, "holds the purse strings" (FSC11). The legislative branch's control of funding was raised by several participants in response to questions of dynamics influencing goal attainment, with some characterizing the Department as "at the mercy" of congressional preferences. Others, however, stated that, while Congress did control funding, the Department's leadership could – and should – do more to develop levers of influence among both members of Congress and key figures within the executive branch to lobby more effectively for resources. Another mid-

level FSO opined that that influence may actually be at most potent at the *start* of administrations, when Department members' expertise and experience could help administration officials navigate the "learning curve" of their new roles and create positive feelings towards the support officials can draw from State (FSC23).

The second and third behavioral themes associated with decision-making appeared incongruous when considered together. The first had to do with the cultural expectations surrounding risk tolerance among career Department employees, which generally manifests as risk *aversion* inculcated as part of the socialization of new career staff, particularly within the Foreign Service. This tendency toward risk aversion is not new; nearly 50 years ago Warwick recognized it as a fundamental component of State Department culture dating to the post-WWII period and, especially, the McCarthy era (Warwick, 1975). A former FSO (FSF13) echoed Warwick's arguments during his interview, stating:

> *The purpose of the bureaucracy is to speak truth to power, not to own the power necessarily, but to speak truth to it and leverage weight with that. And McCarthy came after the experts. It's since become embedded in State Department culture and leadership to wilt in the face of confrontation rather than stand in one's power and one's knowledge and one's expertise and say, no, I'm the expert here. You are not. And you have your right to make whatever decision you want, but you don't have the right to define these facts.*

Many participants described the tendency toward risk aversion as *learned* behavior once joining the Department, with several noting that the ability to calculate risk to themselves or their career prospects was a key factor in choosing actions, making recommendations, or even pursuing particular assignments. At the same time, some participants repeated the common justification of slow-walking decision-making to provide sufficient time to consider possible or probable outcomes, with one retired FSO asserting "diplomacy isn't

about kicking down doors; it needs to be nuanced and judicious" (FSF07). The challenge was to find the right mid-point between inertia and recklessness, the importance of which was clear to the many participants who cited the willingness to be "courageous," to make and stand by a decision, and embrace innovation as important characteristics of effective leadership. However, as several remarked, everyone *wanted* courageous leadership but only those at the most senior levels could get away with it, and ascending to those levels required the careful avoidance of risks. As a senior-level FSO said, "the Department wants someone who doesn't make waves but gets the work done" (FSC29).

The tension between the careerists' "nuanced and judicious" approach to diplomacy and the inclination of many political appointees to "kick down the doors" is a recurring theme in the literature concerning appointees at the State Department. Scoville's (2019) examination of the "aberrational practice" of U.S. presidents drawing from their political supporters for ambassadorial appointments suggests that the gap in capabilities between appointees and career diplomats is widening, and that appointees seem to be increasingly willing to step across normative lines in pursuing their or the president's agendas. Haglund employs a novel dataset drawn from the State Department's Office of Inspector General to evaluate leader performance at overseas embassies, finding that "dutiful, expert" career leaders tend to outpace their "politically connected by incompetent" appointee peers (2014, p. 82). The "exceptional energy and zeal" appointees are presumed to bring to their role as ambassadors too often fails to materialize into better performance as their lack of substantive knowledge overwhelms their enthusiasm (Bok, 2003, as discussed in Haglund, 2014).

The cultural reality of risk aversion clashed with the third sub-theme to arise out of discussions of decision-making behaviors: empowerment. Many participants talked about their desire for their leaders at all levels of the State Department to entrust employees with the ability to contribute to discussion and deliberation, even at the more junior levels. Part of that empowerment required leaders to "champion others," but delegation was just as important and frequently cited as critical to the participants' own development as a leader. One longtime member of the senior foreign service characterized empowerment as "the single most important thing that I look for in a leader…I want somebody to trust me that I know what I'm doing" (FSC17). While a large number of participants raised concerns about appointees disregarding their expertise, a fair share also discussed it as a dynamic common among leaders at all levels of the organization. As a result, career employees tended toward "group think," a "stifling of dissent," and an "unwillingness to hear alternate perspectives" as they moved through their careers.

Among those who voluntarily separated from the State Department before reaching retirement age, the challenge of working within such a risk-averse culture often contributed significantly to their separation decisions. As one former FSO (FSF09) who left for the technology sector after a decade of service put it:

> *The thing that I think I found most frustrating is that you could spend an entire career, 30 years in the foreign service, and finally be able to make a decision, maybe when you're a DCM, and the first day that I worked at [current employer in the private sector], for example, before I even arrived on my first day, someone had sent me a PowerPoint deck and said, 'would love your thoughts on this.' And I remember thinking, I'm not sure that I have my own thoughts on things.*

The picture that emerged from the participants was a clear desire to be empowered and included by their leaders, or aspiration to delegate and embrace others' contributions when leaders themselves. In a similar vein, many noted the need for greater innovation and willingness to take risks to the benefit of the Department workforce's ability to achieve its policy aims. However, the practical reality that individual risk aversion was not only preferred but often *rewarded* through promotions, coveted assignments, and one's "corridor reputation" too often outweighed any potential benefits of stepping out of the policy comfort zone. For those who stayed in the Department long-term, the ability to "make peace" with a significantly reduced risk tolerance was critical. However, for many, that pragmatism came at a price for the Department overall, as career employees embraced a more instrumental approach to their careers.

Behaviors associated with relationships among organizational members

Participants also discussed the behaviors they associated with various relationships within the organization. Most often, these broke along leader-follower lines, with extensive descriptions of the behaviors they valued, sought, or avoided in their direct line of leadership. In Department parlance, these leaders were referred to as a member's "rating officer" or "rater" – their immediate supervisor, often a section or deputy section chief – and their "reviewing officer" or "reviewer." Reviewing officers serve at one or two levels above rating officers; in some cases, they are the rating officer's direct supervisor, while in many smaller missions that function is filled by DCMs. Every foreign service officer has both a rating and a reviewing officer who perform both the day-to-day functions of supervising their work and drafting the annual employee evaluation report (EER) on which all promotion decisions are based. FSOs

participating in the study often framed their comments about leadership and leaders as observations about behaviors and assumed attitudes of their raters and reviewers.

Relationships – and the leader's responsibility in creating, strengthening, and managing them – were a recurring theme in the interviews. Participants frequently cited the need to feel supported by their leaders, both individually by their raters or reviewers and collectively by senior leadership as an organization. That support was critical to trusting their leaders and setting the foundation necessary for a solid working partnership. Many entered the leader-follower relationship presuming support, particularly the FSOs for whom frequent changes in leadership are part and parcel of their professional lives, provided the leader was also a career State Department employee. A potential rating or reviewing officers' corridor reputation often played an important role in how FSOs chose future assignments to pursue. As one career member of the senior foreign service (FSC08) noted:

> *You know, there was a very specific point in my career where I decided I would make that the primary part of my bidding strategy to have a good boss. It was after a particularly negative experience. And I decided this is the only thing that matters to me is that I have a boss I can count on to be that leader I want to work for. And once I really started to think about that, it really changed a lot about how I thought about bidding.*

While the majority of FSOs said that they would *prefer* to take the expected quality of leaders into account while making bidding decisions, few of them actually did so, citing the inherent challenges of doing so withing the revolving assignments structure at the State Department. Officers who tried to work for particular rating or reviewing officers could be stymied by unexpected curtailments (premature ending of an assignment), medical leaves, or simply not being chosen for the assignment, leading many to conclude that, while attractive in theory, following a particular leader was almost

impossible in practice. Those, like the FSO cited above, who were able to do so were uniformly at the most senior levels (FS-01 or SFS), suggesting they enjoyed greater control in pursuing assignments. More commonly, FSO participants who did take anticipated leader behaviors into account tried to avoid leaders with particularly poor reputations. One mid-level reporting officer (FSC15) was blunt their assessment:

> *I definitely have a short list of people I will work hard to avoid, and if they show up, I will leave. Point blank. Because what I always say, and I would rather be in hell with wonderful people and a great team than in Paris with assholes, to be very frank about it.*

Much of the focus for career employees on leader-follower relationships and the behaviors they engendered was on the immediate personal effects of those actions, especially the feelings brought about in response, particularly with their immediate supervisors (raters). Participants commented on the supervisor's ability to have a significant impact on how they (the participants) approached their roles, developed within them, and viewed their own level of competency. These dynamics were profound among foreign service officers, whose assignments could vary dramatically in scope and functionality, especially in the earlier stages of their careers when they were still learning how to navigate the Department and its processes, including bidding for assignments. The level of respect and support those FSOs experienced varied greatly for each participant, which may help explain why it arose so frequently in discussions of leadership in the Department.

Their civil service peers, on the other hand, were uniformly positive about their experiences with the leader-follower dyad. All of the civil service contributors reported strong, mutually respectful relationships with their immediate supervisors and described much more collaborative working situations. That may stem from key differences

between FSO and civil service role assignment. The civil servant members of the participant pool were each chosen for their particular technical expertise or knowledge by a leader who worked in the same functional area. Importantly, the responsibility for making the "right" selection for civil service roles may weigh heavier as, once in the position, a civil servant may remain in place for years, or even decades, deepening their subject matter knowledge. On the other hand, with assignments lasting three years or less, the potential damage wrought by a "poor fit" on the FSO side is naturally time limited. If an FSO is a spectacularly bad fit, their assignment can be curtailed almost instantly, a flexibility not generally available in the career civil service.

The differences between the foreign and civil services, and the relationships between them, was raised a few times in the interviews, almost exclusively by career civil servants themselves. In general, they reported good working relationships with their foreign service peers, especially in the on-the-ground experience and outside perspectives they brought. However, all made comments, directly or indirectly, suggesting that the Department's leaders value and prioritize the foreign service more than the civil service, particularly in allowing opportunity for advancing up the leadership ranks. As a GS-15 civil servant (CSC01) with more than a decade at State put it:

> *Pretty soon on when I understood the difference between contractors, civil service, foreign service, I started understanding the way the Department is structured. I realized that [my] bureau had a cap for me in that specific issue I was working, so I knew I was going to have to leave to find something else. And, spending more time as a civil servant, I realized the importance of career longevity is focused on the foreign service, and the ambassador track is probably not something that would really ever be an avenue for me. Maybe SES one day if I can hold out that long, but I realized I was going to have to be very, very aggressive in order to move up in my career.*

None of the civil servant interviewees expressed negative feelings towards the foreign service or FSOs with whom they worked, often within the same office. Rather, their concerns were more practical, as they faced similar challenges in moving upwards in rank as their civil service peers in other federal agencies and felt that the rotational structure of the foreign service, with its up-or-out requirements, afforded FSOs greater ability to ascend to positions of responsibility and authority. Like other agencies, State's civil servants are typically hired for their subject matter expertise or their ability to acquire it quickly and serve as the institutional memory for the agency. As a result, it is common for civil servants to enter the Department at the mid-career level, a decidedly different approach than the foreign service, which requires all officers to start at the same entry-level grades, with some lateral entries at the mid-level in extraordinary circumstances. It is also important to note the relatively small number of civil service participants among those in the study, which decreases the strength of conclusions that can be drawn from their contributions.

The participants expressed consistent respect for the contributions of their peers on the "other side of the house" (i.e., civil or foreign service). The picture was significantly more mixed when describing behaviors associated with relationships between career members and non-career appointees, ranging from collaborative and collegial to extreme distaste of the latter by the former. Many participants expressed the benefits that can come with appointees, especially those with significant "pull" among D.C. power players. Some appointees, a few commented, come to the Department with respect for their career colleagues and subordinates, as well an enthusiasm to learn how to operate effectively within the Department and potentially drive innovation. The

behaviors they associated with these positive perspectives included asking questions of careers, *actually* listening to the answers, demonstrating humility from the start, and not trying to challenge or change processes without understanding why they existed in the first place. Some participants also mentioned attempts at inclusion, particularly of junior officers, in discussions or high-level meetings, such as the country team (a standing meeting with the heads of each office or functional area, the DCM, and the ambassador), though even they admitted these efforts were often infrequent to the point of seeming to be tokenistic.

Less positive descriptions of appointees generally fell along two lines: the "do-it-my-way" group and the antagonistic group. The most extreme cases had a foot in each camp. The "do-it-my-way" appointees relied on their prior successes in whatever industry, sector, or – in the case of those with former federal experience – governmental branch, presuming they would be equally successful in their roles at State. As participants noted, most of these appointees came to the Department from the private sector and, having reached significant positions of power in their chosen industries, were perceived as viewing their appointments as extensions of that privilege, and expected subordinates to follow every dictum without question. When confronted with a team who pushed back, regardless of how respectfully or lightly, many appointees reacted poorly. As a mid-level management officer (FSC31) expressed it:

> *I think the [Trump] administration was generally viewed within the State Department that they did not respect the idea of structure and why that structure exists. Even if they want to change it, even if they want to change foreign policy, that's fine. What you heard from a lot of FSOs was 'we can do what you want to do; we just need to do it a different way that is sustainable, that is defensible.' But I think, in their eyes, pieces of the bureaucracy were just getting in the way of achieving their goals as quickly as possible. And so, people weren't listening.*

A career FSO (FSC08) who previously served as an ambassador offered an interesting insight into the appointee mindset after encountering several of them during the course of the FSO's tenure in a regional bureau with many appointee chiefs of mission. When listening to the appointees describe what they viewed as reluctance or balking by career officers at their directions, the FSO recognized the type of prudent and deliberative behavior that was constantly reinforced among career foreign service officers, who were socialized to be cautious in taking risks to ensure all potential outcomes, positive and negative, were identified and weighed. The resulting culture clash between appointees and career employees frequently resulted in behaviors on both sides demonstrating frustration, and a perceived lack of respect for one's contribution. Given the major differences in career progression and understanding of what constituted "success" in their respective fields, these clashes arose with each successive round of appointments, thereby reinforcing their misplaced assumptions.

Of course, in some cases, not all of the malintent perceived by career employees about appointees was inaccurate. While the dynamic between careers and political was, as a career member of the senior foreign service put it, "particularly toxic" during the Trump Administration, many participants pointed out that it was neither uncommon nor associated more with one party over the other. As a former longtime member of the senior foreign service (FSF12) characterized it:

> *It seems to me you have people who have a virtual antipathy to anything having to do with foreign policy or America's role. And somehow this is a zero-sum game, and anything we spend abroad is resources wasted and should have been spent domestically. It's a failure to understand basics about our national security and our role in the world.*

Another retired career ambassador (FSF06) used even starker language when discussing former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, a career foreign service officer who served briefly as Secretary at the end of President George H. W. Bush's term, saying, "he loved the foreign service, no doubt; he was one of *us* before he was one of *them*" (emphasis added). Secretary Eagleburger served as the Department's head for two months, first in an acting capacity and then through a recess appointment to finish out President Bush's term. Prior to those two months, he spent over 30 years as a career foreign service officer (Office of the Historian, n.d.).

A different facet of the career-appointee relationship arose in some discussions with FSOs at the more senior ranks (FS-01 and SFS) who pointed out the differences they saw in how qualifications and performance were evaluated on each side. Broadly speaking, they called out what they viewed as significantly higher expectations for career employees, particularly those placed in roles of significant authority, such as ambassadorships and assistant secretary roles. To ascend to those positions, career FSOs, and the occasional career civil servant, spend decades building resumes with multiple tours in key focus areas (such as the Department's "Russia hands" or "China hands") and a progression through functions of increasing responsibility for teams and policy execution. Many appointees – *too* many in the view of most of the participants – had minimal exposure to U.S. foreign policy or the policy process before being placed in charge of an overseas mission or in a policy-informing position in Washington. As a mid-level FSO bluntly stated, "sometimes we do a really shit job of putting political appointee leaders in a place knowing the challenges that are in that arena because the

administrations want to pay back a political favor" (FSC31). A member of the senior foreign service (FSC29) strongly echoed that sentiment, saying:

> *Career ambassadors shouldn't have to go through the same process as outside political because the Senate has already attested us. Politicals are different – they're political by nature and got their jobs as rewards, whereas generalists, by design, can do whatever job they're given. The processes need to be overhauled, but speaking what you think is career suicide and can make it hard to get follow-on assignments.*

Throughout the interviews a picture emerged of career-appointee relationships starting with neutral or negative attitudes on both sides. Those preconceived ideas about how each "would" behave and what motivated those behaviors were then reinforced by varying degrees of confirmation bias on both sides that skewed perceptions of their behaviors. Interestingly, when asked whether, all other factors being equal, they would prefer to work for a career officer or an appointee, the respondents overwhelming favored the career officer with several noting that, even if that officer wasn't a particularly good leader, they at least "got" the foreign service life and its attendant challenges. This spoke to the other set of behaviors that were closely associated with career-to-appointee relationships: a lack of recognition by appointees of the realities of the foreign service career, with its constant moving, long hours, life in often difficult or even dangerous conditions, and potentially lengthy separations from family including, in some circumstances, spouses and children. That appointees frequently failed to acknowledge or understand these was compounded by the privilege enjoyed by many of the appointees themselves, especially those serving as ambassadors, including living in luxurious housing with plentiful staff, high rank, and extreme deference from host-country interlocutors *and* their American staff at the embassy. One prior appointee ambassador serving in Western Europe did not enjoy spending time alone in their residence, deciding

instead to work in their office during all but a few U.S. holidays. As a result, all of the American staff was expected to report to work on those holidays as well for no additional pay or compensation for time away from family; those who failed to appear at work were reprimanded publicly by the ambassador, who frequently bemoaned how "lazy" State Department employees were.

It is important to note that the perceptions of appointees held by career Department staff were not uniformly negative. Appointees were often praised for the outside perspectives they brought to the Department, including a greater willingness to embrace innovation and technology to address policy or operational challenges. Some spoke of appointees with whom they had served who expressed their profound sense of honor to be selected to represent the United States and their commitment to doing so to the best of their abilities. Others described the willingness of some appointees, especially those who were extremely wealthy, to contribute significant personal funds towards mission activities, including hosting celebratory events for their team or paying for minor renovations or redecorating. One mid-career FSO (FSC30) shared that the political appointee ambassador during their second would frequently stop junior officers in embassy hallways to hand them several cash notes with instructions to take their host-country counterparts to lunch or drinks. That same ambassador, however, was also known to shout or belittle staff members when unhappy or frustrated, behavior that was generally not tolerated among career staff, who trusted the "corridor reputation" system to weed out abusive leaders in the foreign service. That conduct was far less likely to result in curbs on appointee behavior as any admonishment had to come from the White House, if it came at all, leading some participants to complain about double standards

that, in the words of a mid-level generalist FSO, "creates quite a lot of friction between the camps" (FSC31).

The behaviors included in this thematic area touched on dynamics that are important markers of the social relationships that underpin organizations. The leader-follower dyad has been the focus of a wide body of scholarly research because of its impact in every aspect of organizational operations. The other two dyads discussed here (career-appointee and foreign service-civil service) invoke language specific to the Department but reflect relationships that occur in all organizations. Careerists and appointees represent a form of the frictions that can arise between insiders and outsiders, especially when, like many appointees, the outsiders are placed into positions of power. Similarly, the differences between the foreign and civil service ranks reflect the natural perspectives of sub-groups in organizations. The discussion of behaviors offers a window into participant perceptions, what factors helped to shape those perceptions, and, importantly, the conclusions they drew from them.

Leader Traits

Traits associated with leadership: commonly cited behaviors of effective leaders

Many of the behaviors cited by participants in regard to their relationships with appointees drew on the broader range of behaviors they attributed to leadership in general. The interview protocol was designed to draw out study participants' opinions on characteristics related to effective leadership. For the purposes of this study, the concept of "leadership" adheres to that proposed by Winston and Patterson (2006) in their evaluation of prevailing definitions found in the pertinent literature as

> …the selection, equipping, training, and influence [of] one or more follower(s)…and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly…expend emotional and

> physical energy in a concerted, coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7)

In other words, leadership involves influencing others' behaviors towards the achievement of commonly held goals. Leaders, therefore, are those who are able to exert such influence on other organizational members and stakeholders. Another critical facet of the function of leaders who have been so designated by their placement into formal leadership roles is their explicit authority to make decisions on behalf of the organization, a responsibility with potentially significant ramifications for organizational members, stakeholders, and – in the case of public sector organizations – public at large (Nutt, 2005). While historically many scholars tended to conceive of "leaders" and "managers" as fulfilling different organizational functions, more recent research has embraced a more competency-based view of these roles so that leadership includes management capabilities and vice versa (Zaleznik, 1977/2004; Atkinson & Butcher, 2003; Sharafizad et al., 2020). This reflects the common interchange of these two terms among scholars and practitioners alike in today's workplaces.

The term "effective" was chosen intentionally as the modifier for leadership, as more commonly used adjectives like "good," "great," and even "excellent" are so subject to the attitudes of the individual and are really useful only when used in comparison to something/someone else. First participants were asked about what "effective" leadership "looked like" – how did they know when they saw it? Most responded with descriptions that blended relational and task-oriented aspects, such as successful policy execution and high levels of team morale. Participants were then asked to name those characteristics that they associated with effective leadership, generating a list of desired attitudes and behaviors that could be grouped into six categories:

- Emotional intelligence;
- Humility and transparency;
- Respect for and support of followers;
- Integrity and accountability;
- Capability/expertise; and,
- Ability to navigate and influence the organizational environment, both internally and externally.

A leader's level of emotional intelligence was a commonly cited set of behaviors, with more than half of the participants raising it in response to interviewer questions. A senior-level reporting officer gave a succinct and useful definition of emotional intelligence as "their ability to quickly, easily understand someone else's perspective, even when they vehemently disagree with them" (FSC27). Demonstrating empathy, understanding, and kindness were often invoked by foreign and civil service staff alike as critical behaviors for leaders, especially when those behaviors were genuine. "You know, I want a human being, someone who isn't a diplo-bot," said the same senior-level officer, an opinion put more directly by another senior FSO as someone "who isn't a jerk" (FSC29). Leaders who attend to the professional, and sometimes personal, needs of their team is of fundamental importance to career employees, as their workload can often lead to long hours under extended periods of stress in hostile circumstances, such as war zones, evacuations, or natural disasters.

While many participants cited the behaviors associated with emotional intelligence as important for effective leadership, it was clear that a number of them had experienced time under leaders who did not demonstrate those abilities. One mid-level consular FSO (FSC30) described the amazement of embassy staff when their career ambassador "genuinely wanted to hear what we thought" and showed that he "actually cared about us." Another mid-level public diplomacy officer (FSC26) simply asked for leaders who

showed "decency" towards their staff, which had not always been their experience. One participant, a mid-level FSO (FSC24) who came to the Department after an academic career, shared a particularly memorable experience during their first tour:

> *My direct supervisor particularly enjoyed the f-bomb. In every meeting, no matter who was in the room, no matter who senior was in the room. And within my first week there, I witnessed the lack of respect that he had. That no one had respect for him was one of the simplest lessons that I learned right away, you know, professionalism and controlling yourself are important. Things fall apart very quickly.*

Foreign service officers, perhaps due to the rotational system in which they work, seemed to value empathy and patience above most other behaviors because, as one senior FSO said, "you're going to have all sorts of different goals and work styles and personalities…so be able to have the element of patience and forgiveness if people screw up or don't catch the vision right away" (FSC22). Civil servants also highlighted elements of emotional intelligence, especially in recognizing their team members as people "with a career and a life and goals and aspirations" (CSC02). One former civil servant specified that they found leaders who are "women and younger tend to be more empathetic to their teams," and that they perceived good listening skills and openness to feedback as strong signs of higher levels of emotional intelligence (CSF01).

Solicitation of, and appreciation for, true feedback was often cited in connection with the second group of leadership behaviors: humility and transparency. In some cases, the participants framed these behaviors as being honest, a willingness to share information, and having "minimal ego needs." Other participants went beyond those to describe humility as a recognition of the leader's own limits of experience, knowledge, or expertise in some areas of responsibility. Leaders with that level of self-awareness acknowledged their gaps and welcome subject matter experts' efforts to fill them or

provide important context. Humility also meant leaders' willingness to admit when they made mistakes or simply didn't have all of the answers. This was demonstrated well by a longtime consular FSO's (FSC14) tale of two ambassadors during the officer's first tour:

> *My first year at post, [the ambassador] was an appointee for one president; my second year was for a different president. The first was fantastic – he didn't know anything about the State Department. He knew full well he had no business being in that job. And he would tell us that without us losing trust or confidence in him. On the contrary, that kind of humility made us want to help him more, and it made him better informed, because he would take the information in like a sponge, and he would apply it. And then his replacement came in, and it was an absolute disaster. And within one year, the morale of the entire mission was just gone. People were frustrated. People felt like they couldn't get anything done. People were talking about curtailing*.

Another mid-level FSO captured the dynamic very succinctly, observing that "to have real power, people need to like and listen to you" (FSC10). That this type of humility was viewed by participants as much more common among career staff than appointees was not surprising, given some of the dynamics previously described between career and non-career officials. It was described by a GS-13 civil servant participant (CSC03) when commenting on what they saw as particular strengths of foreign service leaders who "recognize they are not an expert, can never be an expert, [so] it requires being able to take some advice" and have "fewer preconceived notions of what the particular subject area is" than their appointed peers.

The complementary behavior to humility was transparency, both in communications and in deliberations on decisions. For several participants, this came down to simple honesty and a willingness to share information. A few others took it further, expressing their desire for frankness even, in the words of one a career member of the senior foreign service, a "radical frankness" that equated to being "open and honest

in everything that you're doing." Some of the participants noted that, of all of the important leader behaviors, transparency was the most challenging one to find consistently given the Department members' penchant for risk aversion. Behind the scenes, however, they proposed, there should be willingness to say "I don't buy this, or this is not heading where we want to be heading" without incurring a "penalty" for speaking up (FSF12). A mid-level reporting officer (FSC19) asserted that Department leaders "need to understand that sometimes transparency is a better way to go, and they may actually be embraced for being bold enough to be transparent and own up on mistakes rather than trying to find something to justify it."

Interestingly, when participants qualified *which* leaders they particularly expected to be transparent, it was generally at the rater and reviewer levels, rather than from senior leadership. Many participants assumed that senior leaders, especially the Secretary and their immediate staff, would be less than forthcoming or engage in general platitudes, either due to national security concerns, if the participants took an optimistic stance, or a lack of care about those at the "worker bee" levels, if the participants had a more jaundiced eye. Several participants inadvertently raised this dynamic when asked about their perceptions of senior leadership's commitment to the Department as an institution, describing the Secretary as "saying all the right things to us" without demonstrating any action to back it up. Some career staff expressed frustration or even anger at the seeming disconnect between the platitudes served up by successive leaders and the lack of meaningful follow-through, such as Secretary Blinken's town halls asserting his deep respect for career staff expertise and contribution while excluding them from decision-

making processes in favor of expanded offices filled with appointees. As one former FSO (FSF09) explained:

> *We were working on things that didn't necessarily matter and kind of pushed away from trying to work on things that were actually important and not included in the loop around what was actually happening. I realized that that needs to happen periodically for purposes of diplomacy – the secrecy – but it was incredibly frustrating when that was taken to an extreme where it was all one-on-one meetings with the foreign minister and ambassador. You had no idea what was coming out of that.*

The most commonly cited leader behaviors fell into two categories: interpersonal and organizational. The interpersonal often weighed more for respondents than those associated with working specifically in the Department. The relational behaviors stemmed from self-awareness and a baseline of respect for others and their contributions and were often linked with organization-focused behaviors. For example, humility was closely connected by participants with transparency, as leaders who admitted they did not know everything were usually more willing to share information and allow others to participate in the decision-making process. Similarly, respect for the capabilities and contributions of others – especially those at lower ranks or newer to the organization – would manifest into overt *support* for others, whether putting their own reputations at risk to protect their team members or advocating for the members' advancement, even if it meant losing them as a part of the team.

Respect was commonly invoked as a critical leader attribute and can be viewed as both an attitude and a behavior, or perhaps the latter driven by the former. Respect was frequently raised negatively in response to questions about leadership quality experienced in the Department, suggesting many participants did not experience it consistently from their leaders. Whether that manifested as disregard or outright disrespect varied along

many aspects but was most commonly invoked when discussing appointee leaders, though several participants were quick to note that "careers can be terrible, as well," as expressed by a mid-level consular FSO (FSC30). Several participants suggested reasons to explain the dynamic, including culture clashes, especially among appointees coming from outside of federal service, exaggerated expectations of deference, and political rancor, particularly during the Trump Administration. As a GS-14 career civil servant (CSC02) observed:

> *They [former Secretaries Tillerson and Pompeo] came into the Department with a hostile predisposition toward career State Department people. They often referred to us as "deep state" and publicly criticized us and said we were trying to undermine their authority. The previous administration felt definitely like an 'us and them.' And it made it extremely hard to want to stay.*

Like that civil servant, many participants expressed feelings of hostility and dismissiveness from members of the Trump Administration that manifested in disrespect for individual officers. However, some took pains to point out that the dynamic was not unique to that administration, though it seemed particularly strong – and consistent – among those appointed by President Trump. In other administrations, particularly those under Democrat presidents, the sidelining of career officers, interpreted less as disrespect than a *lack* of respect, could be common, including in the current Biden Administration. Some senior career participants described frustration and even anger in response to actions taken by Secretary Blinken that seemingly contradict his public statements about advocating for the Department's workforce. These included the appointment of former FSOs who resigned at the mid-levels (FS-02) during the Trump Administration to senior leadership roles, including deputy assistant secretaryships (DAS), a role more commonly filled with senior-level (FS-01, SFS, and SES) career officers. In addition, though

Secretary Blinken had previously praised the contributions of career staff, his tenure had seen multiple senior-level offices created and staffed almost exclusively with appointees, such as the Office of the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, headed by former Secretary of State John Kerry and, according to one senior FSO participant (FSC08), employing more than three dozen appointees, many of whom worked at State during parts of the Obama Administration. That senior FSO expressed the frustrations of peers who, having been told that senior leaders wanted to repair the "hollowing out" at State that took place during the previous administration, were "more politely" pushed aside by the current one. The resulting lack of respect for their contributions and capabilities hit harder than the attacks under Trump, hence the bitterness expressed by multiple senior participants. As another career member of the SFS (FSF12) remarked:

> *My concern with the current team is there were a lot of people who left [under Trump] and now came back in very senior jobs, some which they are probably not qualified or prepared for. I worry about the signal that it sends to the career people, that the best thing you can do if you want to get ahead is leave and come back.*

Interestingly, the dynamic just described seemed to be limited to the most highly ranked of the participants, though the desire to be respected was a common refrain throughout the participant pool. For the entry and mid-level FSOs and civil servants, respect was framed much more commonly as critical to the supervisor-subordinate dyad and, therefore, was much more personal. Many of those same participants commented positively on the Blinken Administration's internal statements about improving the working environment for career staff; any delays in execution of the many workforce-centric priorities generated since 2021 were usually attributed to the urgency of foreign policy issues or routine bureaucratic challenges. They expressed gratitude that "someone

was finally" trying to make changes for the better while often caveating their praise by stating their vantage points were "too low in the pecking order" to view what was "really going on in Washington." Instead, they focused almost exclusively on the dynamics taking place in their immediate environment, where the behaviors of those in their leadership chain (rater, reviewer, office director, DCM, or ambassador) had a direct impact on their daily lives.

A similar dichotomy appeared when participants raised leader actions related to integrity and accountability. Those participants at lower ranks or shorter tenures tended to equate integrity with honesty, a characteristic raised frequently in response to questions about leadership as one of the most important behaviors as it demonstrated commitment to others. As one mid-level FSO (FSC19) said, "If they really care about you and your success, they will speak honest, sometimes painful, truths because they want you to get to that better place." More than a dozen participants rated honesty in their top three desired leader behaviors, with several placing it as number one. However, in nearly all of these cases, the participant was describing their relationships exclusively with career leaders in both the foreign and civil services. As with issues of respect, the exceptions to that perspective occurred with more senior-level participants, especially those who had filled very senior roles in the Department, such as ambassadorships. They took a broader interpretation of integrity, tying it with more normative concepts, such as ethics and standing by one's word no matter the costs, perhaps reflecting the significant increase in responsibility for others associated with the senior functions. As a mid-level management FSO (FSC20) expressed:

> *I think for people who are higher up, once you get to the position where you're supervising hundreds of people or thousands of people, I think one*

> *of the most important things is understanding the extent to which when you say something offhand that could lead to hundreds or thousands of manhours of work that you may not have intended. When someone says, oh, I don't like this chair. And then eight people spend 10 hours trying to find the perfect chair for you and spend $10,0000 of the U.S. government's money. You just have a much more inadvertent impact at that point, and they have to be aware of it.*

With that level of responsibility comes the necessity to act ethically and in alignment with organizational norms, a belief that is inculcated in career staff from the beginning of their tenures with the Department. The State Department's ethical requirements, which derive from federal law and executive orders, are codified in dedicated sections of the *Foreign Affairs Manual* (FAM) and the *Foreign Affairs Handbook* (FAH), both of which are applicable to its career and, to a lesser extent, noncareer employees (USDOS, 2023; USDOS 2015). The standards explicitly reference the avoidance of the *appearance* of unethical behavior or conflicts of interest to protect the public's confidence in the instruments of governance. Those with longer tenures in the Department tended to frame integrity – and its behavioral partner, accountability – in leaders with similar goals, both in relation to their subordinates as well as shaping outsiders' perceptions of the Department itself.

Accountability was a particularly important component for those whose perspectives focused on the Department more broadly rather than on individual supervisor-subordinate dyads. As conceived by these participants, the desired accountability often conflicted with a State Department culture that seemed to encourage or even reward avoiding taking responsibility, especially for difficult decisions. They viewed accountability as extending beyond a leader's personal responsibility to be held answerable for their own behavior but to the leader's duty – in some cases, the *courage* –

to make decisions and stand by them, even when the outcomes were not as hoped. This form of accountability arose both in discussions around leader behaviors and willingness to take risks, both for career and appointee leaders but in different ways. For career leaders, decision-making or openly supporting the decisions of others often clashed with the culture of risk aversion previously described. According to multiple participants, the responsibility to make and stand by decisions was generally viewed as something to be avoided as much as possible to protect one's position and corridor reputation; pushing decisions up the leadership chain was, according to one former mid-level FSO (FSF07), much more common than not, remarking:

> *That was probably my number one gripe with the Department is, you know, for every 10 people in leadership, I felt like at least five or six just looked at every decision or every initiative and or every opportunity and did a quick calculation as to what's my risk here, am I exposed, could this come back to bite me?*

Others linked accountability through decision-making with other desired leader behaviors, such as humility and respect for others' capabilities. A mid-level diplomatic security special agent (FSC09) put it succinctly, saying "If they make a decision, they'll accept input, and then once a decision is made, it's made, and it's their decision." Whether attributed to risk aversion, lack of humility, or generally poor leadership skills, leaders who shirked accountability were met with uniform derision from the study participants.

The other category of commonly cited leader behaviors connected them with organizational dynamics, some associated with general organizational factors and some with elements particular to the State Department. Repeatedly, participants described wanting – and admiring – leaders with the right combination of capabilities and expertise,

generally gained through years of experience, that prepared a leader for operating inside and outside the organization. As a senior-level management FSO (FSC28) said, "I want somebody who knows what they're doing, who knows what to advocate for, and how to delegate, which is no small thing." Delegating effectively can be a challenge for many leaders regardless of organization type, with many struggling to let go, leading to micromanagement. In the Department, however, the structure of the bureaucracy and formal differentiation of roles moves the emphasis in delegating from letting go at all to, as the aforementioned FSO characterized it, doing so *effectively*. Given the nature of policymaking and the level of discretion afforded to Department officers, knowing what is appropriate to delegate to subordinates and what must be kept within the purview of leadership. For example, first-tour FSOs serving in overseas consular sections hold sole authority for their adjudication decisions on visa applications; no official, up to and including the Secretary of State, can force an officer to issue or refuse an application against their better judgment. That said, if a policy is altered that would preclude issuance to a particular class of applicant – such as during the Trump Administration's so-called "Muslim ban" – the decision to make that change must lie with the senior-most Department officials or even with the presidential administration itself.

Many participants spoke of the criticality of a leader understanding "how the Department works" and the realities of the foreign service lifestyle. The latter point was underscored by several participants when talking about appointees, especially the ambassadors whose role as chief of mission made them personally responsible for the FSOs and families at their posts. Appreciating the challenges of long foreign service careers was, they said, very different from having actually lived it. Similarly, personal

experience with navigating the Department's formal and routine processes, from assigning staff to routing and clearing policy papers to budget formulations, was absolutely critical to functioning successfully as a leader, leading the truism that serving tours in the "mother ship" (the main State Department headquarters in Washington, DC) was fundamental to ascending to positions of leadership. Even the most humble and open-minded appointees would struggle to perform effectively as they learned how the Department works, often likened to "drinking from the proverbial fire hose." In an organization designed around internal networking and professional reputation, outside leaders were at a distinct disadvantage when entering the Department. Though some learned quickly, their time-limited tenures often meant that just as they became efficient, it was time to move on. As a mid-level public diplomacy officer (FSC12) said:

> *The ambassador in my first post was a very nice man. Kind person. Spoke the local language. But I felt like the learning curve for just how an embassy runs, who everyone is, it was just never going to happen. It was one of those things where it was just such a big gap that the career officers really had to do almost all of it. So, in addition to their regular jobs, they were also really, really supporting him.*

Other participants focused their concern for capability and expertise on the practical skills necessary for effective diplomacy. For those who framed their descriptions of leader behaviors to their immediate chain of leaders, these often derived from the on-the-job nature of FSO training in the field. Consular officers wanted leaders who both fundamentally valued consular work and could offer practical guidance on interpreting the FAM correctly to adjudicate applications. Reporting officers relied on their leaders to teach them how to develop contacts within their host country and draft cables that would get the attention of policymakers back in Washington. Similar dynamics were reported from management officers, public diplomacy officers,

diplomatic security special agents, and office managements specialists. For foreign service officers, having a direct supervisor who understood the context and realities of the roles of their subordinates meant better training, clearer directions, and – ideally – realistic performance evaluations, all of which were important to professional development and individual work output.

On the civil service side, there was far less concern expressed by officers over the capabilities or expertise of their leaders. While they generally cited capability to perform job functions as an essential leader behavior, the structure of their offices and civil service hiring procedures made it less likely that a leader would be put into a position of authority without the requisite knowledge. Civil service positions, particularly at the higher GS levels, required demonstration of particular skills and abilities – often gained through years of experience – to be hired; the emphasis on subject matter expertise in offices staffed predominantly by civil servants increased the likelihood that leaders would understand the functions carried out by subordinates. Therefore, the consistency with which many FSOs emphasized the need for their leaders to "get" their work and lifestyle suggested they did not experience that in some assignments, and the effect was magnified when reporting to an appointee.

Related to capability and expertise – and sometimes highlighted as the most critical capabilities for the most senior leaders – were the leader behaviors associated with navigating and influencing the organizational environment, both internally and externally. In the latter area only, appointees were often cited as those with a greater ability, depending on how well connected they were with other areas of the federal government, especially the presidential administration or Congress. The power to pull

attention to particular policy issues or access resources to boost policy execution was much more the purview of appointees than career officials. However, other areas to navigate, such as the interagency process, shifted the advantage back to career officials who often built their credibility and issue-specific networks over years or even decades. Several participants, especially among the senior-most officials in the study, noted that, outside of the Department, "people care about what you know, not what your title is" (FSC17). Appointees frustrated by the bureaucratic structure of the State Department faced similar challenges working within the interagency, though some – if well-connected enough – did not hesitate to go around it by reaching out to their contacts in certain offices directly. In the views of the study participants, while the ability to do so could be helpful in the short term, more generally such behavior undercut accountability and left staffers out of important discussions.

Within the Department, career leaders definitely maintained the upper hand over appointees in navigating the organization, though that capability could vary dramatically between individual career officers. In examples provided by study participants, that capability could range from knowing who needs to be in the room for a particular conversation to who to contact on behalf of a subordinate for a desired onward assignment to which offices need to clear on a policy paper. Importantly, they also understand *why* and to whom each of these actions were important – critical context that appointees, even though who served multiple times in the Department, often fail to recognize. Decisions, as one mid-level FSO said, shouldn't be made in a vacuum as they can affect so many other things. Without real understanding of the interconnectivity of the Department, its people, and its functions, leaders risk both failing to achieve their

goals and creating new problems in other areas at the same time. Therefore, according to the study participants, leaders who do not gain the necessary experience to develop true expertise are frequently stymied in their attempts to execute policy and instill confidence in their ability to lead among their team members.

Traits associated with leadership: leadership development

An interesting aspect of the interview responses was how quickly participants named the characteristics they seek in, or associate with, effective leaders. Rarely did a participant answer with "I need to think about that a bit," unlike questions regarding other dynamics in the Department, like macro factors influencing goal achievement. When the discussion turned to *development* of those characteristics and capabilities, respondents answered just as quickly, though with more variation. The behaviors associated with leadership development were almost uniformly framed as by demonstrated "the Department" or "the White House" versus connections with particular offices or leadership functions within the organizations. One exception to this was multiple references to the responsibilities of the Director General of the Foreign Service (DG), a position officially designated to "manage" the Foreign Service and filled exclusively with a current or former career FSO (Office of the Historian, 2014). Originally designated by the Secretary of State after its creation in 1946, the DG role became a presidential appointment after passage of the Foreign Service Act of 1980. Several years later, the DG assumed responsibility for all "personnel aspects" of the foreign and civil services, including recruitment, selection, assignment, promotion, and discipline. Multiple participants referenced the role of the DG – and, in a few cases, the current DG, Marcia

Bernicat, explicitly – when discussing leadership development efforts within the Department.

Overall, participants characterized leadership development within the Department negatively regarding both career and non-career (appointee) leaders, though for different reasons. Echoing other thematic areas, FSOs were far less satisfied with both the development of leaders and the quality of leadership they experienced than their civil service peers. Given the small number of civil servants in the participant pool, generalizing these outcomes to State's civil servant population was not supportable, but given the descriptions of leader-follower relationships in their broader interviews suggest that structural differences in how employees enter and move through the Department change how they experience leadership throughout their careers.

The most common descriptors of leadership development behaviors by career employees in the study were "uneven," "insufficient," and "under-resourced." Again, these responses broke along foreign and civil service lines, with civil servants speaking more positively about Department leaders' general approach to leadership development. That said, only one of the civil service participants in the study served in a formal leadership role themselves, suggesting their perspectives focused less on their own development and what they inferred from the behaviors of the leaders above them. For FSOs, however, responses consistently highlighted gaps between what they sought and what they actually experienced in terms of leadership development for themselves and, more broadly, throughout the career ranks. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in Arlington, Virginia, provides formal training for FSOs and many civil servants in languages, diplomatic tradecraft, and various technical skillsets, including supervision

and leadership. However, as several longtime career employees pointed out, the Department has lacked sufficient staff to create a real "training float" that would permit individual officers to enter lengthy training while preserving the ability to staff all required positions in Washington and abroad. That challenge is not new; former Secretary of State Colin Powell determined in 2001 that the Department needed at least 1,200 additional staff to allow for that float, leading him to launch a "Diplomatic Readiness Initiative" and lobby Congress for significant additional funding to hire well above attrition rates (Davis, 2002). As of August 2023, Department leaders were still trying to create that float, with Secretary Blinken announcing an expansion of FSI's training capacity, stating "the truth is for decades we under-invested in training, because we were short-staffed on the frontlines" (Heckman, 2023). As a result, FSOs reported, formal training was generally not prioritized except for mandatory language ability associated with overseas assignments.

Many participants shared that, over time, they began to believe that the Department's leadership was either unable or unwilling (or both) to invest in developing their career staff, leaving preparation for roles of increasing responsibility to the officers themselves or informal mentorship by more senior staff. As a senior FSO and career ambassador said, "that's why I'm so concerned about what is happening now with so many people not able to get the situational mentorship they need" (FSF08). Modeling their approach to leadership on what they experienced themselves in earlier assignments, participants said, was challenged by the "luck of the draw" of who was in their chain of leadership as part of the foreign service assignment process. For some officers, another factor influencing development of leadership capabilities was a perceived difference

between what behaviors they associated with "effective leadership" and what they believed Department leaders actually valued. Several participants noted that "good leadership" was too often equated with moving quickly up the ladder of promotions than in policy goal achievement, especially if that achievement required taking risks or dissenting from popular opinion. The promotion process, they noted, was fraught with problems as it depended on written statements of accomplishments that "often don't match reality" and were not based on quantified or uniform standards of performance. As a result, many FSOs expressed the belief that the secret to getting promoted was the ability to write well and not one's actual ability to execute job functions.

The majority of study participants expressed that, while they occasionally encountered "rock star" leaders during their tenures, most were average to poor. Most attributed these outcomes to the struggle to develop leadership as well as a performance management system that consistently failed to identify or address poor or inadequate leadership. As one FSO (FSF06) who left the Department during their first assignment described:

> *I was doing the job. I had a great social life in [Western European post]. But my supervisor at the time – and I think it was something within our section because it had a series of bad managers – a series of people had curtailed or resigned out of our section. And I did not know this, of course, because nobody's going to really tell you these things until you start to see the patterns.*

The FSO later explained that they were "taken aback by some of the issues with management," issues that were long-standing and not talked about in ways that could lead to resolution. Ultimately, the FSO decided to resign from the Department during their second tour despite planning for a foreign service career since entering college. Another study participant, a mid-level FSO generalist (FSC35), faulted the foreign service hiring,

promotion, and assignment structures, particularly the up-or-out requirements, for leadership development challenges, asserting:

> *We don't hire leaders. We hire people who can answer quiz show questions. We expect people to become leaders even if they are better on the technical side and prefer to stay there. And they struggle to become good leaders because that's not their core competency. Assignments are based on who is liked, not on who is most competent for a particular job. Most FSOs are smart, but they don't get the training they need to be capable, plus the constant turnover means there are no real consequences if you're not capable.*

Overall, career FSOs seemed to believe that effective leadership came about through the capabilities and attitudes leaders brought with them into the Department; whether or not they developed any positive leadership behaviors during their careers was left essentially to chance.

Of course, the members of the State Department have far less opportunity, exercised or not, to influence the leadership development of political appointees. As some participants, especially former desk officers, non-career ambassador preparation for their confirmation hearings often outweighs that for actually executing their roles. The formal training session for new chiefs of mission in how to carry out their duties, the Ambassadorial Seminar, lasts a few weeks; the average career FSO appointed to ambassadorships serves for two decades in roles of progressive responsibility before reaching that position (Stern, 2020). Many study participants characterized appointee preparation as inadequate, particularly regarding leading their workforces. Some also pointed to assumptions of transferability of skills gained in prior work to diplomatic roles as unfounded in many cases, particularly for those appointees coming from successful careers in the private sector. A mid-level public diplomacy officer (FSC26) described the dynamic:

> *We have this misconception that people coming in that are political appointees – they're coming from the private sector – like they've got some special magic, like they know more than us. Like they're smarter than us because we're government employees and they're private sector. Maybe they're more up-to-date on the latest technologies that are available because their company is willing to not purchase from the lowest bidder. Maybe they're capable of making snap decisions because they have the ability to implement those decisions in a quicky way. But it doesn't make them a better leader. It doesn't make them more qualified.*

When discussing important leadership competencies and behaviors, the study participants most often focused on relational dynamics – such as supporting their teams and treating them with respect – than task-oriented ones, like policy agenda execution, with some suggesting that the latter was best achieved by focusing on the former. Some did differentiate between the skills demanded of ambassadors due to their roles as chiefs of mission versus those leading policy offices back in Washington. Too many appointee ambassadors, they observed, focused on the "very, very narrow things that they either personally want to get done or that the administration has as a priority," leaving no consideration for leading other aspects of Departmental operations at overseas posts (FSC31). Others pointed to appointee ambassadors who cared only about the ceremonial aspects of their roles, such as one former appointee to a Central American post who told a startled entry-level officer during their first meeting that "Before I got here, I didn't know this was an actual *job."* Several study participants laid the fault for these mismatches at the feet of administration officials who prioritized paying back political favors over substantive qualifications. As a senior-level political officer (FSC27) opined:

> *We know that there are political appointees whose work and life experience do not naturally lend themselves to being a top tier diplomat or leading a diplomatic mission. Or they may have relevant experience, but they still cannot adapt to the culture of the Department of State, or they are flogging a policy that we cannot execute, that we cannot*

operationalize. There are many ways that even if somebody has a resume that looks good on paper, it just can't work in the day-to-day operations.

From the dataset emerges a picture of ongoing leadership failures within the Department, some created by presidential priorities and others of the Department leaderships's own making. Selection processes that do not focus on demonstrated capacity for leadership are compounded by inadequate systems for developing, evaluating, and rewarding competencies necessary for effective organizational leadership. As a result, the majority of participants experienced "really inconsistent" leadership during their tenures; while they rated some leaders as "excellent," those numbers were outweighed by those they categorized as mediocre or poor. One former FSO stated that they were "far more impressed" with the capabilities of their peers than those in positions of authority over them, while another senior-level FSO who previously worked in the private sector said, "the poor leaders [I've encountered] have been among the most incompetent/malicious individuals I have ever encountered in my professional career" (FSC27). Overall, the wide diverge between the behaviors many participants expected of their leaders and what they actually experienced was stark, and their belief that the situation was unlikely to improve during their tenures was both disheartening and, based on their rationales, understandable.

Organizational Attitudes

Attitudes associated with motives

Employees bring an inherent level of motivation into the organizations they join, which are formed by a host of experiences, internalized influences, and normative attitudes, starting with the very reasons they choose particular organizations. Given the mission of the Department of State is to "protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity,

and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive" and the challenges that can come with constant moving and job changes, I expected a large portion of the study participants to describe their primary motives for joining the Department to skew heavily towards a desire to serve their country and/or fellow citizens (Department of State, n.d.1). While some did attribute their decision to apply to the Department to an inclination for public service, most did not or, if they did, it was a secondary motive only. A mid-level FSO (FSC23) expressed that mixed motive, saying, "I served a [religious] mission overseas and, while I was there, I walked by the U.S. embassy and thought, huh, wouldn't it be amazing to have a career that would allow me to serve and be overseas?"

Rather than public service, most of the FSOs in the study stated that they were motivated by the opportunity to live and work outside the United States. A few had international experiences while in school, such as through foreign exchange programs, that inspired them to go abroad once they began their professional lives. A career member of the SFS (FSC17) described his career as starting on a bit of a whim then transitioning into deep appreciation for the work that kept them in the Department for nearly 30 years:

> *I mean, I joined because I was interested in living abroad, and I was interested in foreign policy, but I didn't necessarily initially come in because I was inspired by the Department's vision. I'm not sure I could even have told what the Department's vision was. And I had only the vaguest notion of what a career in the Foreign Service would entail. I definitely developed a very strong appreciation and love of public service, but that really wasn't what brought me into the foreign service.*

The primary motives expressed by participants fell into seven categories as detailed in figure 5.

Figure 5: Distribution of primary motive for joining the Department of State

Primary Join Motive	Number	Percent
Desire to live/work overseas	16	38.1%
Interest in international relations	8	19.0%
Desire to serve U.S./fellow citizens	6	14.3%
Job structure/fit	4	9.5%
Partner/spouse employed by DOS	4	9.5%
Extending prior career federal service	2	4.8%
Conversion from contractor	2	4.8%
Total	**42**	**100%**

Unsurprisingly, none of the four civil servants included among the participants cited their interest in living or working overseas as a motivation, which made sense given civil servants rarely embark on assignments outside the United States. However, two of them ended up in permanent career positions with the State Department after being originally assigned there in contract positions and converting when they discovered they enjoyed the work. The other two came to the Department through U.S. government-funded fellowships through their undergraduate or graduate programs of study in international relations. Most (four of six, 66.7%) of the Foreign Service members whose primary motives focused on their desire to serve their country cited family orientations toward service as a major factor, such as growing up in a military or Foreign Service household (two participants were second-generation FSOs). The remaining two FSOs were first generation immigrants who expressed a strong desire to "pay back" what their families had received from the United States.

Many participants attributed their joining the Department to distinctly personal interests, such as living or working abroad, a pre-existing interest in international relations or U.S. foreign policy, or because their spouse/partner was already a member of

the Foreign Service. Others were motivated more by the structure of the Foreign Service than the focus of the work itself as a mid-level public diplomacy FSO (FSC21) shared, saying "someone told me about the Foreign Service, that it might be a good match for me because I get bored, and I like new challenges." Another mid-level FSO (FSC26) echoed that instrumentality:

> *It came down to having a job where you were paid to learn languages and move around for the rest of your life. And I couldn't believe that was a thing. And, I was like, that is amazing! And then I just thought it was so fascinating. And so interesting. And I was really interested in it.*

In some cases, participants expressed secondary motives; this was generally where public-service orientation arose. However, of the 32 FSOs who did not give that orientation as their primary join motive, only five (15.6%) explicitly stated that a desire to serve others or the public contributed to their decision to become a career member of the Foreign Service. Other secondary motives similarly overlapped with primary reasons, such as those wanting to live or work overseas having an interest in foreign policy or finding the specific job functions (e.g., working as a special agent at the federal level) particularly appealing.

While most participants did not cite a public-service orientation as their main reason for joining the Department, over time some developed a high level of buy-in with the Department's specific mission, which then influenced their decision to remain with State. A civil servant participant with more than a decade of experience admitted, "I didn't know much about the State Department, but I got in, and I fell in love" (CSC02). Several participants talked about the variety of issues and sense of being at the front lines of U.S. foreign policy as particularly attractive work elements, though the degree split along foreign and civil service lines. Others were initially motivated more by the

structure of the Foreign Service than the focus of the work itself. Over time, however, many career employees gained an appreciation for the particular work done within the Department, with a career member of the Senior Foreign Service (FSC17) saying:

> *The bottom line is, you know, there aren't a lot of other things in the work world where you can say, if this is what you want to do, this is the only place you can do it. You can't be a foreign policy practitioner and not work for the government. And, yes, there are some other agencies where you can be work on niche areas of foreign policy, but not the broad breadth of what the State Department is doing.*

For many participants, the work conducted at the Department became, over time, an aspect to be considered when deciding whether to remain for the long-term. A number of participants expressed that, when they joined the Foreign Service, they expected to complete one or two assignments, then move on to other roles in the public or private sectors. For those who stayed longer than they initially anticipated, commitment to the Department's mission was frequently cited as a factor, though it was not the most common. As in their motivations for joining, the majority of career employees who were currently serving in the Department or had retired after decades-long tenures named a variety of personal interests that weighed heavily in their decisions to remain in the Department long-term. Not surprisingly, many who joined out of a desire to live and work outside of the United States enjoyed the travel and cultural experience opportunities, noting those were much more difficult and expensive to partake in while living stateside. A few discussed the financial benefits of overseas service, especially in comparison to living in the Washington, DC, metro area. While overseas, FSO housing (including basic utilities) is provided by the Department, a benefit not afforded during any domestic assignment, leading many FSOs to avoid serving at Main State or in other stateside posts. For those FSOs who serve in countries designated as dangerous or high

hardship, additional incentive pay can push annual salaries to between $150,000 and $200,000 for an officer with six to 10 years' experience. As one mid-level consular officer said, "it's much cheaper to live well in the Foreign Service."

The financial benefits of service with the Department were not exclusive to compensation or to those overseas. Several participants talked about the influence of retirement benefits with the federal government as an important consideration in whether they remained with the Department for extended periods. Both civil and foreign service employees qualified for a government-funded pension after a five-year vesting period; in addition, both had the opportunity to participate in the Thrift Savings Plan, a tax-deferred supplemental retirement savings program similar to the 401(k) plans popular in the private sector (USDOS, n.d.2). While civil servants at State follow similar benefits structures to those in other U.S. federal agencies, FSOs are statutorily required to retire at the age of 65 unless serving in a Senate-confirmed appointed position (PAS) (United States, 2015). FSOs also qualify for full retirement, including a pension, benefits from the Department after reaching the age of 50 and completing 20 years of service, a factor multiple participants cited as heavily influencing their decision of whether to stay in the Foreign Service when other aspects might lead them to consider voluntary separation. One senior-level FSO in their mid-50s with 17 years of service said that "absolutely nothing" would convince them to leave the Department before reaching the minimum retirement threshold, a sentiment expressed by several FSOs close to the "50/20" point.

When asked what considerations *would* lead them to resign from the Department, participants' responses were most often concerned with work-life balance, either their own or that of their immediate family members. Many participants said that they planned

to remain in the Department "as long as it works for me and my family;" as a result, they approached their career commitment on an assignment-by-assignment basis. Should a situation arise in which they would be forced into an assignment they did not want or the costs to their families become too high, several said they would leave their current function, the Department, or government service entirely. Some FSOs discussed converting to civil service roles, if possible, should their particular circumstances pushed them to be stateside indefinitely as FSOs are limited by policy to six consecutive years in domestic assignments without a waiver attesting to necessity for the good of the Department. The most common scenarios described by these FSOs involved their immediate family members, such as children with special needs, spouses unable to pursue their professional goals abroad, or aging parents. The rigors of constant relocation arose in these and other interviews as well, particularly among officers who were single when they embarked upon their State careers but later married and/or had children for whom those challenges could be significantly more impactful.

Compounding the difficulties of frequent moves and job changes were the perceived problems many FSOs experienced in working within the bureaucracy at State, especially in relation to the logistics of their nomadic lifestyles. One mid-level management FSO (FSC31) headed to their third post in as many years due to taking a one-year assignment in a high hardship post in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic had not seen any of their personal effects in over two years other than what fit into two suitcases each from them and their spouse. Other officers described the additional stress of transporting family members or pets under the policies of the Department that did not allow issuance of plane tickets until shortly before departure, making it extremely

difficult for officers to arrange seating together or book their pets on their same flights. Still others talked about extended separations from family members due to the need to cover critical staffing shortages. For example, one former diplomatic security special agent (FSF15) explained that the extension of close protection coverage for former Secretaries of State and family members of former presidents forced them into assignment on a security detail that kept them away from home for weeks at a time.

Over time, dynamics that were initially mere annoyances could become a much greater negative influence on some officers' desire to stay with the organization, leading them to consider resigning or, in some cases, actually doing so. Of those who admitted to thinking about separating but had not, the most common factors cited for remaining involved the tangible benefits they received as career employees, especially those within a certain proximity to retirement age, and, a bit surprisingly, a commonly shared belief in the lack of transferability of their skills and experience acquired in the Department. That idea was particularly described among those who had entered the Department early in their professional careers and among those FSOs who had chosen to focus in the political, economic, or consular cones. There were no such concerns expressed among the public diplomacy- or management-coned FSOs, foreign service specialists, or civil servants. Among the 10 former foreign service officers in the participant pool, only four (40%) had resigned before reaching retirement age; the reasons cited for their separations all differed from each other. One FSO left to take a position in the technology sector after becoming frustrated by the slow path for career FSOs wanting to move into positions of responsibility. Another FSO left at a relatively junior level to pursue opportunities to influence policy development more directly. A third (also junior) generalist resigned after

two tours during which they were "a little taken aback by some of the long-standing issues with management" (FSF06). The fourth, a former foreign service specialist, moved to a different federal agency to concentrate on particular law enforcement functions that they felt "would never be a priority" within the Department.

While several study participants expressed varying degrees of irritation with elements of their roles, the lifestyle impacts, management quality, or complications of Department policies and procedures, few had actually taken the step of resigning. In addition to the four aforementioned FSOs, one civil servant participant had also resigned from the Department and was working at another federal agency at the time of their interview. After several years of service at State, they reached a point in their final role when they became convinced that the only way to move up was to leave and pursue further education, a step several career colleagues encouraged at the time. Unfortunately, the civil servant (CSF01) was unsuccessful in finding a way back into the Department after completing graduate school, stating, "I left with the hope of coming back, and I didn't even get an interview." Similarly, one former mid-level FSO was informed by State's Office of Global Talent Management that, while *technically* tenured foreign service officers were eligible to return within five years of their resignation, the Department "rarely accepts" former generalists back into the fold; the FSO was advised the best option if they wanted to rejoin the Foreign Service was start the hiring process from scratch, including entering at the most junior (FS-04) level. That process, according to a 2022 analysis by the American Foreign Service Association, had less than a 6% success rate (AFSA, 2022).

During the interviews, participants shared a few common sets of beliefs and assumptions about the motives of others, especially organizational leaders. When discussing what they believed propelled the actions of *career* leaders, such as their rating or reviewing officers, participants' comments echoed their more general attitudes about what behaviors were valued and rewarded by Department members and leaders, such as avoiding risk, protecting one's supervisor, and "not rocking the boat." Any motivations ascribed to leaders in the career ranks reflected the instrumentality apparent among many of the participants when describing their own reasons for how they behaved within the organization. Career leaders ascended the ranks of the same system in which the participants worked, so the close alignment of assumed leader motives with their own made sense, especially when considering that motives, unlike behaviors, are not observable, requiring the observer to draw inferences based on their understanding of the organizational context and individual(s) involved. In an organization where members are socialized into the cultural expectations from the start and rewarded for their ability to demonstrate their compliance with its strictures, it is reasonable to presume similar motivations among fellow similarly socialized members.

When the interviews turned to the motives of political appointees, however, the participant opinions diverged into two distinct sets of behavioral drivers. The first view arose in response to questions about the perceived level of organizational commitment among the senior leadership of the Department in place at the time of the interviews (July to August 2023). As several participants noted, several of the leaders appointed by the Biden Administration had served within the State Department during some portion of the two Obama Administrations, including Secretary of State Blinken, who served as the

Deputy Secretary of State under Secretary Kerry between January 2015 and January 2017 (Department of State, n.d.1). Similarly, Wendy Sherman was appointed the Deputy Secretary of State by President Biden in April 2021; Sherman had previously served in appointed roles at State as the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs under President Obama, and as the Counselor for the Department, the Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs, and the policy coordinator for North Korea under President Clinton (Department of State, n.d.1). Deputy Secretary Sherman's tenures in the Department were interspersed with work in think tanks, consulting, and campaign advising during non-Democrat presidential administrations, a textbook example of Heclo's "in-and-outers" who populated the United States' "unique approach to staffing the top of government" (Heclo, 1988, p. 37).

Participants in the study, especially the entry- and mid-level foreign service officers, generally viewed these perennial appointees more magnanimously than appointees who came to the Department from private industry or the donor classes. When asked to describe their beliefs about the commitment of Secretary Blinken, Deputy Secretary Sherman, and other senior leaders to "the Department as an institution," most said they "seemed very committed" and that they were "saying all the right things" about strengthening the institution. The fact that they served in multiple roles in the Department over several years was interpreted by some participants as proof of their commitment to its mission, with one early-career FSO (FSC20) saying they "must absolutely be very dedicated to it, or [they] wouldn't spend 30, 40 years in the Department." What emerged in some interviews was a type of circular logic regarding in-and-outers: they were presumed to be committed to the Department because they return to work within it, so

demonstrating that commitment meant returning, not actually making substantive changes to the institution. In other cases, the magnanimity led some participants to differentiate between some of the "frequent fliers" among leadership from in-and-outers solely focused on their own advancement, with one mid-level management generalist (FSC31) saying:

> *We have other people who, like Secretary Blinken, have been political appointees for their entire life. So, for all intents and purposes, they are government employees, they have worked up from the bottom and kept working at the ladders, so I put those people in a different bank than people who jump around different organizations and different think tanks and universities and come back and they did in and out. Those people are just there for their personal gain or for their personal ideologies rather than the organization.*

The FSO's comments reflected a common belief among career employees that those who filled multiple appointments in the Department were motivated by their commitment to it, even when they were more generally dismissive of in-and-outer behavior. Interestingly, the same FSO later cited Wendy Sherman as an appointed leader with a "different approach" and better understanding of the organization, though her time in the Department was interspersed with periods in the "think tanks and universities" the FSO had earlier derided.

The majority of study participants took a decidedly less rosy view of appointee motivations, with many attributing their decision to join the Department as driven by their desire for personal gain. In some cases, that benefit focused on particular policy goals, especially those shared by the presidential administration under which they served. Some participants associated that dynamic strongly with the Trump Administration under Secretaries Tillerson and Pompeo. As one senior-level FSO (FSC22) said:

> *In the last administration – and I'm just being honest here – there were a lot of individuals who came in with an agenda in mind who did not really care about the institution or the organization, but more about achieving certain policy aims. In that respect, my views have changed somewhat in realizing that not every senior leader in the organization necessarily supports the long-term goals and strategy that we generally have inherited.*

While appointments exist to allow presidents to put individuals in place to carry out their policy agendas, a few participants described dynamics that suggested some appointees were laser focused on executing *their* own policy agendas, regardless of the president's priorities. Two different participants – both former FSOs, one who retired at the mid-level and the other who resigned after a decade– spoke of the same political ambassador who served in a Middle Eastern nation closely allied with the United States, with the one (FSF09) saying:

> *Ambassador [name withheld] was perhaps the most successful ambassador I've ever seen for his own personal agenda. And not necessarily the U.S. agenda, although I think he made his personal agenda the U.S. agenda. [The] President had basically just simply handed over his real policy to [the ambassador] and so he was able to do whatever he wanted in many ways.*

The other officer (FSF14) put it more directly when asked about appointees: "My brain always goes to Ambassador [name withheld] because it was the most flagrant, and he didn't have the interests of the Department in mind."

More generally, the personal-gain motives ascribed to appointees were described in terms of professional or financial advancement after completing their tenure with the Department. Some participants pointed to appointees who were drawn to the rank and privilege associated with being an ambassador and were less interested in the concomitant responsibilities of being a chief of mission. Some appointees expected career employees to defer to their preferences solely on the basis of their title and could feel

"sort of untouchable." This dynamic was particularly grating to career staff when the appointee's time in the Department was viewed merely as a steppingstone in their career or their focus was on "very, very narrow things that they personally want to get done," as those appointees were unlikely to be "involved or invested in all of the other work that has to happen in the State Department" (FSC31).

Most participants who described appointee motives in terms of personal gain did not necessarily fault them for having those priorities; rather, they pointed out that focus on personal goals or benefits of serving usually resulted in no concern for the broader needs of the Department. This was similar to the complaint about appointees whose single-mindedness on executing the president's foreign policy agenda left no energy or interest for caring for the workforce or the operations of the organization. Several participants described how these assumed motives played out in appointees' behavior within the Department, particularly in decisions about what priorities made it onto their agendas and what level of resources would be devoted to executing those agendas, and how the time-boundedness of appointments propelled those behaviors. As one civil servant (CSC02) shared:

> *It seems like most political appointees hit the ground looking at the clock and knowing that they only have four years max, depending on when they join, to make a mark for themselves. And it often feels like making a mark for themselves. It doesn't suck as much when your values align with what they're trying to do. But it's still very much a rat race for them, which drives the pace of work, you know?*

Another mid-level FSO (FSF12) captured how the emphasis on short-term goals could undermine the Department leaders' ability to act strategically, saying:

> *A lot of non-careers come in with a very short-term perspective, and I appreciate some of that. I mean, the administration has to worry about the election cycle, and I understand where that comes from. But if it's too*

> *much the focus, it's at the expense of seeing what is in the long-term interest. And most of us in the career service tend to think a little more secular, if you will, in that regard. So, what are things that transcend administrations? What are the interests that transcend?*

The perceived inability or unwillingness of appointees to consider the needs of the broader organization was a recurrent theme among participants. How charitably it was viewed by participants depended on what underlying motives were assumed, with those attributing the failing as an unfortunate by-product of the need to execute a complex agenda at an aggressive pace more likely to see it as a lack of capacity than those who believed the appointees to be driven by hopes of personal gain.

Attitudes associated with expectations vs. realities

In addition to exploring participants' motives for joining the State Department, they were asked about their expectations for their tenures with the Department. Did they plan to stay for the remainder of the professional careers? What did they know about the organization's structure, mission scope, or opportunities to progress up the ladder of responsibility? For FSOs in particular, what did they anticipate regarding promotions and assignments? Somewhat surprisingly, a common response from the FSOs among the participants was that they knew little to nothing about the Department's operations or the operations of the Foreign Service. Considering the number of participants who shared that they pursued a position in the Department for live and work abroad, perhaps the dearth of substantive knowledge about its operations should have been anticipated, especially among those who joined State in the pre-internet era (14% of the participants entered service before 1995); however, even among participants who entered the Department in the past ten years, there was a large percentage who expressed that, like

this mid-level FSO, “I really didn’t have a good idea” just what they were joining (FSF12).

For the civil servants in the study, there was a similar level of unfamiliarity with the structure, operations, and unique attributes of the Foreign Service, which for one was immaterial to their own experience on the civil service side of the Department as they worked exclusively alongside fellow civil servants. For the three who worked in roles with FSOs, their interest in the Foreign Service was limited to how those careers intersected or influenced their own roles, particularly the generalist perspective versus their own subject matter expertise perspective. Otherwise, none of them expressed expectations about their civil service roles that were off base from what they actually experienced. For one civil servant, they entered with no preconceived notions about the Department when they originally arrived as a contractor; by the time they converted to a direct-hire civil service position, they were already well familiar with the scope and structure of the organization. Another came to the Department as part of a fellowship then stayed when a direct-hire position opened in the same office. The other two were already familiar with the more common entry process for federal service (i.e., postings on the USAJobs.gov website) when they chose to join the State Department, so their expectations aligned with their actual experience.

Among the FSOs in the study, a lack of understanding of the realities of the Foreign Service lifestyle was quite common, particularly for the more specific aspects, such as the assignments process or requirements for promotion. Some also expressed that their understanding of State’s role in the foreign policy process was inaccurate or minimal, particularly regarding the influence the Department’s leaders had on policy

development and how that could translate into expertise for individual officers. For one former FSO (FSF13) who had previously worked in the legislative branch, that assumed connection between working in the Department and becoming an expert was both the impetus for joining *and* leaving the Foreign Service after a few tours:

> *I was working on foreign policy, and I had access to everybody. [With some people, it was like] wow, this person clearly knows so much stuff, has so much detail and color, and I want to be like that person. So, I would read their resume, and I kept coming across 'Department of State,' so I said, well, okay, that's the direction I need to go. I knew very little about it; I really had no clue what foreign service was or even really what diplomacy meant other than generally. And I think the more I've learned about the Department of State, the more that I've appreciated that, in our structure, State is not the chief maker of foreign policy. I think it probably should be, but it's just not today. It's not performing what I think it's supposed to be doing, which was one of the reasons I think I grew frustrated and left.*

An interesting data point arose during the interviews that demonstrates both the lack of understanding many FSOs had of the Department's structure and operations on joining and a tangible outcome of that knowledge gap. Generalist FSOs must select one of five cones (Consular, Economic, Management, Political, or Public Diplomacy) as part of the application process. For many, their ability to advance in the promotion process or secure preferred assignments is based in part on their service in roles designated under their chosen cones. During the interviews, FSO participants were asked to share as part of their background and demographic information if they were a generalist or specialist. If a generalist, the participant was then asked their cone and if that cone had changed during their tenure through a process known in the Department as "conal rectification." Generally accepted wisdom among the FSOs in the study was the belief that, while rectification was possible in certain circumstances, it was difficult to accomplish and not frequently approved. However, among the 38 generalist FSOs in the study (67% of whom

were currently serving), eight had changed their cones during their tenures; three additional FSOs had entered the Foreign Service during "experimental" periods when cones were not chosen until after an officer was granted tenure (a minimum of three years of service). Therefore, of the 35 generalists who came into the Department in a specific cone, nearly a quarter (23%) changed their cones after several years of experience, suggesting that a lack of understanding of what serving in roles designated in their originally chosen cones entailed led to dissatisfaction with some aspects of their role within the Department. Additionally, several of those who changed their cones believed that their promotion to the mid-level ranks (FS-02) were hindered by their serving in the "wrong" cone, a supposition bolstered by the fact that at least three were promoted to FS-02 during the review cycles that immediately followed their successful cone conversions.

When asked about their expectations for the tenures and, specifically, their career trajectories, participant responses fell into three general groupings: (1) they knew little to nothing about career progressions; (2) they expected to be promoted through the FS ranks at a "fairly normal pace;" or (3) they anticipated rising to the Senior Foreign Service and serving in senior-level roles, such as deputy chief of mission (DCM) or ambassador during their careers. Most of the responses fell within the first two groups, with some of those in the second group admitting to harboring a secret belief that they would actually be part of the third group, though, as one senior-level consular FSO (FSC14) said,

> *We were all given to understand very early on that that was unrealistic, that most people don't get to ambassador, and that a normal career trajectory took you through FS-01, possibly the lowest levels of the Senior Foreign Service.*

Among those who entered the Department with minimal knowledge of what factors influenced decisions on tenure, promotions, and assignments, some expressed frustration

at how that lack of understanding may have disadvantaged them earlier in their careers. Many in the second group were similarly frustrated but for a different reason, as their expectations failed to match the realities of their Foreign Service experience. This was especially prominent among the FSOs who entered during the hiring surge that took place between 2008 and 2010 after significant lobbying for congressional funding by Secretaries Powell and Rice to address years of hiring at rates lower than attrition. When the massive influx of junior-level officers became eligible for promotion consideration, an insufficient number of mid-level openings led to a phenomenon referred to by FSOs as "the pig in the python." Diplomatic Security (DS) special agents were particularly affected by the mismatch; of the two DS agents still with the Department during the study, both had been stuck at the FS-03 level for nearly a decade with no expectation of promotion to FS-02 for several more years. The third DS agent in the study had separated from the Department partly due to their inability to be promoted despite multiple raters and reviewers recommending them for promotion "at the next opportunity."

While many participants described their minimal knowledge or unrealistic expectations about their careers before joining, most were able to rectify this once embarking on their careers, learning from colleagues and leaders more about the realities of the organization they had chosen to join. Those who were less successful in reconciling what they thought they would encounter and what they actually did were primarily among those who had separated from the Department before mandatory retirement. Among the current members of the Foreign Service, there was a palpable sense of pragmatism regarding their early years in the Department, when they knew less about the organization and operating within it. When asked near the end of the interviews

if, knowing all they did now about how the Department operates, would they still join, nearly all of them said they would, though several said so with an important caveat: they would have managed their careers much differently by pursuing different assignments. A recurring theme among several of these FSOs was that they had chosen roles that they thought would lead to faster promotions, greater levels of responsibility or policy influence, or put them "on the radar" of the most powerful career officers. In the end, however, those strategies had been unsuccessfully, at least in achieving those ends, leading to regret at missing out on more meaningful, if lower priority, assignments or creating hardships for their families. Some also expressed their openness to separating from the Department before retirement eligibility, with a mid-level FSO (FSC33) with more than a decade of experience saying:

> *I've realized that the Department is more competitive than I expected, and my progress is slower than I thought it would be. I don't think I "play the game well," when promotions and assignments depend on having the right opportunities to demonstrate ability. Though I planned to stay until retirement, I'm not so sure anymore.*

For those participants whose expectations of a career with the Department and their place within it differed substantially from what they encountered after joining, there was a sense of disappointment that the justice that they anticipated in an organization in which most members (the career employees) all came up through the same system did not always play out how they thought it would. On the Foreign Service side, the emphasis placed on one's corridor reputation could cut both ways. Ostensibly, the corridor reputation was about rewarding officers known for their successful performance with key roles and rapid promotion. However, dependence on reputation as the critical factor in assignments and progression often placed the value in the relative power of those in a

member's network; if the "right" person put in a call on an officer's behalf, they could secure a position for which they were unsuited or unqualified. As a mid-level public diplomacy officer (FSC12) characterized it:

> *I do think it comes down a lot to who you know, because that's who's going to be able to get you that job, especially when it comes to a staff assistant or director. That happened to me…the other person who competed against [me] had a personal relationship with the person, so you know how it's going to go. It's nothing again [me]…I get it. But I feel like that's very common, unfortunately.*

Other participants shared different examples of dynamics that they had anticipated would be handled more fairly than they actually experienced. Several FSOs pointed to the divergence between their expectations of successful performance and what they perceived as the Department leadership's view, which they said amounted to "climbing the hierarchy" by "kissing up," "not rocking the boat," and not "staking controversial positions." When asked how *they* defined or characterized success, their answers ranged from "achieving positive outcomes in the world" to developing the next cohort of career State officials. Others discussed their belief that political appointees were not held to the "same standard as foreign service officers," a dynamic that "creates quite a lot of friction between to the two camps." They pointed to particular appointees who had minimal, if any, experience in government service or policy analysis yet were placed in roles of significant responsibility, noting that if FSOs or civil servants filled those roles they would be required to have deep levels of expertise developed over long periods of experience.

The area in which the tangible differences between expectations and realities was most pronounced had to do with leadership within the Department and how, for most participants, what they encountered was a far cry from what they anticipated. Several

participants discussed how they felt their expectations for leader quality and behaviors was inflated due to the mythos of the State Department and, especially, the Foreign Service. As a longtime mid-level FSO (FSC21) said, invoking a common Departmental catchphrase adopted from the title of Halberstam's 1965 examination of the foreign policy realm, "People join the Foreign Service: they're looking for *the best, the brightest*…at least that's what they sell you on" (emphasis added). When encountering both a range of capabilities among fellow career staff and a system that seemed to reward factors other the quality of one's performance, these participants were disappointed, frustrated, and, occasionally, angry. As the same officer (FSC21) continued:

> *I was promoted quickly initially, and then it took forever. I don't know how to basically get to that next level because it's a creative writing contest. My end-all was not like I wanted to end up at the top, you know, career ambassador or anything. But the fact that it just seems completely unattainable to keep moving up the ladder seems insane. And yet, people who are not good at managing people get promoted in these positions, they can't manage people, and then people leave. Watching this happen over and over again is frustrating.*

Repeatedly, participants reported poorer levels of leadership in relation to what they had expected when joining the State Department. While some blamed the hiring and assignments processes for not selecting on demonstrated leadership capabilities, others pointed to what they perceived as a woefully inadequate approach to leadership development that results in inconsistent outcomes that, in turn, negatively impact working conditions. Former Secretary Powell instituted a requirement for formal leadership training during his tenure, though the lack of a "training float" limited most officers to one-week mandatory courses following promotion (in the Foreign Service) or hiring into leadership roles (in the civil service). In recent years, the Department's leaders have worked to expand leadership development training offerings at the Foreign Service

Institute, though ability (including funding) to participate is not guaranteed. For FSOs seeking assignment in formal leadership roles, demonstrated ability or readiness to execute those roles are not always the primary considerations for selection. Participants reported knowing of FSOs obtaining assignments in roles of responsibility based on being the tandem partner of a highly sought-after FSO in the same post or office, having the requisite language skills, or having worked in the office of the bureau's assistant secretary, who directed post to offer the position even though the individual scored last on its evaluation matrix of hiring considerations.

Without a robust, structured approach to preparing employees to encumber leadership roles, most in the Department relied on informal mentorship or simply observing others' behaviors to learn how to meet performance expectations. In some cases, FSOs said they were "lucky enough" to catch the attention of a more senior officer who took them "under their wing" and taught them the unwritten rules for succeeding in the Department's heirarcy. The value of mentorship was a common thread in discussions of leadership development within State, though most who raised it complained about the lack of a formal program or how much happenstance played into finding a mentor who could teach the "right way" to approach one's career. For most participants, the responsibility for connecting with a mentor was entirely theirs, though some noted experiencing attempts at assigning mentors to more junior officers, with mixed results. As a mid-level FSO (FSC32) shared, "Essentially, my first five years in the service, I didn't have any sort of mentors…it wasn't until around year five that I sought out a mentor."

Others listed mentoring as a critical behavior for immediate supervisors, especially those working with career employees at early stages of their careers, such as those completing the consular tour required of all untenured foreign service officers, regardless of their cone. For these participants, mentorship was essentially synonymous with development, particularly in relation to preparing employees to assume leadership roles. Those who made strong connections with mentors early in their careers often maintained those bonds – and the benefits accruing from them – throughout their careers. In turn, they will often become mentors themselves to "pay back" what assistance they received, with one former career ambassador (FSF12) saying:

> *Mentoring and development of talent is so important. Why taking care of others as you rise in the service is so important is because, if we don't do it, no one else will. And so, I fervently believe that.*

An even less formal version of mentoring was described by some participants, one in which the "mentor" was not aware of their roles in the leader-follower dyad. These were the situations in which the participant described learning how to be an effective leader by studying what *not* to do as demonstrated by poor leaders. As one FSO (FSC18) shared, "In my almost 20 years of federal service, I've seen a lot of weak [leaders], and I want a leader to be strong and transparent and [not] self-serving." Another mid-level generalist (FSC15) was very direct on this point, saying "I learn a lot about how I don't want to lead people every day." This was reinforced by the response by the majority of participants when asked to rate the overall quality of leadership they had experienced in the Department: poor.

In discussing working directly or indirectly for political appointees, many participants raised the lack of leadership development among appointees as an important

factor in the quality of their performance in roles of responsibility. The importance of adequate preparation for assuming control over team of career employees was highlighted by one senior-level FSO (FSC14) who said:

> *The aspect of throwing these completely unknown quantities into these very delicately balanced embassy atmospheres where you're trying desperately to accomplish some very specific goals on behalf of the American people, to just throw this wild card in there simply because he or she was a prominent campaign donor or somebody who plays golf with the President just seemed absurd to me all of a sudden.*

Training and development for appointees depends on the function they will fill. All appointees receive support in preparing for their Senate confirmation hearings if in a PAS position, usually coordinated by a mid-level career employee, such as a desk officer, and consisting of policy briefings, opening statement writing or editing, and answering anticipated questions for the record (QFRs) from key senators. If appointed to a chief of mission (ambassadorial) role, the incumbent must also attend the aforementioned ambassadorial seminar, which covers a variety of topics, with particular emphasis on avoidance of prohibited behaviors. Career ambassadors also attend the seminar, though most are already well-versed in the content from previous assignments in senior roles. While required to attend the seminar, appointees were characterized by some participants as paying attention only to "what they want to hear," especially the more ceremonial aspects of the roles, such as selection of artwork for their residences or protocols for interacting with senior officials in their country of assignment. Even in this realm, a few participants pointed out, appointees can struggle, with one former generalist (FSF09) saying, "I do think one of the keys to more senior Department leaders is some representational abilities that are required that I think people grow into over time in the form of service."

Examples of the challenge of adequately preparing an outsider to step into a role of major authority arose throughout the interviews. Several participants pointed to most appointees' lack of understanding of the operating processes in the Department – as well as the reasons *why* those processes existed and the form they took – to explain why even "nice" and "well-meaning" appointees struggled to be effective. The learning curve for outsiders was, in their view, exceptionally steep and could produce major negative consequences if they failed to learn quickly enough. What requirements career officers viewed as necessary to ensure the transparency and accountability expected of public servants were often viewed by appointees as unnecessary "restrictions" designed to prevent them from executing their agendas. Multiple study participants described working under appointee ambassadors who became frustrated with their inability to navigate the bureaucracy or, in some cases, bend it to their will, leading to inefficient or ineffective operations. As one senior FSO (FSC29) said, "They need to learn how to handle changing to a new position when *everyone else* knows more than you." Interestingly, this dynamic seemed to be associated almost exclusively with appointee ambassadors and not with appointees in policymaking roles in Washington, who participants considered to be more likely chosen due to previous experience with the party in power, recognized subject matter expertise, or a combination of the two.

Attitudes associated with trust and commitment

When describing differences between working for non-career (appointee) and career leaders, many participants focused on the difference in priorities between the two and how that influenced their ability to trust their leaders to do right by them. Even the "nicest" of appointees were at a disadvantage in how career employees trusted them to

relate to the challenges of working in the State Department, with the complexity of issues, constant sense of being under-resourced and under-appreciated, and challenge of working long hours separated from friends and family in far-flung corners of the world. As a mid-level economic generalist (FSC32) shared, "I definitely feel when I have worked for political assistant secretaries, I've definitely felt less of a kind of commitment to the people within the Department than when I've worked for career assistant secretaries who have very much been a part of, you know, walking in their shoes as well." The sense that non-career leaders fundamentally fail to understand the lived reality of career officers was a common reason given by several participants for preferring to serve under a career leader. One senior-level consular officer (FSC14) faulted the system of appointments – and in some cases the appointees themselves – for this failure:

> *Any organization has a culture. If you bring in an outsider, they will not understand the culture. By definition, that's just the way it works. It doesn't matter if it's government or private sector. So, if you bring in someone who not only doesn't understand the culture but also feels that they're too high above everyone to bother to understand the culture, they're going to be tremendously ineffective. So, please, just give me career.*

The issue of trust was also discussed by some participants by explaining how they developed faith in the integrity of the leader and vice versa, which was usually predicated on having time to build confidence in each other, a dynamic undermined by the time limits on appointed roles and those filled by FSOs. Without the belief that appointed leaders would look out for their team members, both collectively and individually, many participants were reluctant to choose to work for a non-career leader. Generally speaking, participants believed that, while there existed poor career leaders, the odds of working for someone who they could not trust were much higher when that leader was appointed.

Some expressed concerns over the lack of accountability or mechanisms for addressing appointed leaders whose behaviors undercut trust, with a retired career ambassador (FSF12) saying:

> *You see this more overseas [with appointees] who are allowed to get away with behavior that no career person would be able to get away with. And nobody holds them accountable either, because they're afraid of them or they have ties to the White House that supersede – or people think supersedes – the State Department, or there's nobody in the State Department in leadership.*

Some participants could be very instrumental in their perspective on working with leaders who they did not actually trust. One mid-level management officer (FSC35) explained the relationship with a former appointee ambassador by saying, "I didn't like this leadership style, because he didn't care about the team's well-being; he was definitely of the 'squeeze' mentality to get people to do things, but he liked the quality of my work, so he liked me, and we got along well." A few officers, when asked about their preferences between working under career or appointee leaders, stated flatly that they only wanted to work for careers as "appointees can't lobby on my behalf for my next assignment."

Opinions about the ability to trust their leaders also weighed in attitudes about the commitment of leaders to the organization and its functioning. When asked about the dedication of current senior leadership to the Department as an institution, some participants contrasted their perceptions against prior leaders, particularly at the Secretary level, with one mid-level generalist (FSC30) stating, "I think certain prior Secretaries were committed to *themselves,* in whatever legacy they were trying to make for themselves." A civil servant (CSC03) shared a similar belief that their bureau's undersecretary, who had also served as an assistant secretary during the Obama Administration, is not "particularly invested in the long-term health of the organization."

As a result of that lack of focus, appointed leaders are perceived as not having a vision for the organization, something that a mid-level reporting officer (FSC19) said, "is essential for FSOs, because we're constantly being told that you're on call 24/7 and, in some cases, literally putting your life on the link, the stakes are higher…you need to have a greater purpose driving you."

Underlying descriptions of the presumed attitudes of appointee leaders was often a sense that the lack of trust cut both ways, with several participants questioning the motives of appointees, both in why they joined the Department and why the acted the way they while in it. As a former Diplomatic Security special agent (FSF15) said:

> *The big question becomes, what is that particular senior individual doing there and why? Because that changes a lot of things. I believe that there are phenomenal people at the higher levels of the State Department who believe that diplomacy is vital to our country and bettering it in our relationships with other countries matters a lot. And then I believe that there are individuals who have gone up to that level because they're looking for their six- or seven-figure job after they retire, and things like that change, right? Over time, right? They might have started going, hey, I believe in this institution, and I want to see through diplomacy properly abroad. And then over time it becomes cynical, or some of them actually join understanding that it might be a quick way to get to that level.*

Even those who judged the current senior leadership, such as Secretary Blinken, as "decent, hardworking, dedicated people" often believed they were not focused on the long-term health of the Department. As a result, the "burden falls on the career people to sort of carry the water," and, over time, career employees reach the conclusion that they cannot trust non-career leaders to protect, promote, or prioritize the well-being of the Department overall and its career workforce (FSF12).

Unlike behaviors, attitudes like motives and expectations are not observable, leading many participants to rely on assumptions about why organizational members

acted in particular ways. However, many of the conclusions expressed about those presumptions were predicated on experience gained over time, either by themselves or among those who mentored or socialized them. While the beliefs participants shared about these attitudes varied, there were some perceptional alignments that offered insights into how members understood certain organizational dynamics, such as motivations, agenda-setting, and accountability. Importantly, participants described conclusions that extended beyond their opinions about what drove individuals' behaviors towards more generalized beliefs about critical organizational elements, including trust in leaders, organizational justice, and their commitment to the Department and its mission.

Political Attributes

Throughout the interviews, participants made references to the perceived divide between political appointees and career employees, much of which has already been described in this chapter. However, there were other dynamics that specifically related to beliefs about non-career political appointments that participants expressed as influencing the attitudes and behaviors of themselves and other career members. Some of these factors were well-known from the prevailing literature on politicization, though through the interviews many participants provided an important – and often overlooked – perspective to scholarship by virtue of *not* being in positions of senior leadership. Interviewees also provided examples of how the persistent use of appointed leaders affected more than the sphere around individual appointees, extending to what they viewed as an abdication of the Department leaders' responsibility to develop and promote effective leaders among the career staff. As a result, participants often reported taking a decidedly utilitarian approach to careerist-political relations, valuing appointees who

were able and willing to wield influence within the administration, the interagency, the legislative branch, or the country of their assignment.

Many study participants rated the overall quality of leadership they experienced within the Department negatively, with many saying it was poor, inconsistent, or disappointing to them. Importantly, these descriptions applied to experiences with both appointee and career leaders, though some emphasized that when leaders were particularly bad (abusive, suspicious of others' motives, etc.), they tended to be political appointees. Some participants with longer tenures said that, while such negative behaviors had not been unusual among career leaders decades ago, they had improved in recent years, with a retired career ambassador (FSF12) observing:

> *I think there are people of integrity, personal integrity, and professional integrity. They treat people with respect. This is something that I've seen has morphed over time has changed and is largely improved in the State Department. That is, you could have risen in decades before to very senior levels of the Department and really be a nasty human being and treat people with disrespect and abuse and other things. Some of that slips through the cracks still. It still happens. But I think it's less and less the case. The challenge we face in that regard is with some non-careers who are ambassadors who are allowed to get away with behavior that no career person would be able to get away with. And nobody holds them accountable either because they're afraid of them or they have ties to the White House that supersede - or people think - supersedes the State Department.*

The question of accountability among appointee leaders, particularly among ambassadors viewed as having particularly close ties with the president and/or administration, was raised multiple times. Some participants described their belief that, as a senior-level FSO generalist (FSC02) characterized it, they are "inconsistent and unaccountable…they asked for this job, [and] when they're bad, they're rarely held accountable for that." Others, like the retired career ambassador above, emphasized that

the level of accountability "is contingent on relationships and personalities" between the appointee(s) and the administration. While several participants contrasted the perceived lack of accountability among appointees with the level to which careerists were held, others pointed out that the current processes for assignments and promotions for FSOs often reduced real accountability for them as well. As a mid-level public diplomacy FSO (FSC26) said, "nobody takes responsibility for anything…[this] is a place where problems get kicked down the road so that the next set of people can deal with it." Overall, participants expressed an expectation that their leaders would both take responsibility and be held responsible for their actions by leaders above them; "accountability" was a frequently cited by study participants as a critical competency when describing their ideal leader.

Commitment to the State Department as an organization – rather than merely to its function in policy execution – was another key leader competency that many participants found lacking in appointees, even at times among those "frequent fliers" who had served in the Department multiple times. Perceptions of commitment among the current roster of senior appointee leaders differed between participants based on proximity to those leaders, with the more senior career members tending to express less of a belief in their commitment than those at the entry- or mid-levels or, at least, their willingness/ability to act on their professed commitment. Among those with shorter tenures in the Department, the most common response to questions about perceived commitment was "they're saying all the right things" and inferring their repeated appointments at State showed the depth of leaders' connection with the organization. However, those with longer experience tended to express frustration with what they saw

as a lack of follow-through on promises to "rehabilitate" an agency that received significant negative attention from the previous administration.

Most of these participants attributed the failure more to senior leadership's singular focus on policy execution than a disregard for the Department's career staff, though a few noted that meeting policy goals depended as much on having capable *career* staff in place as having particular leaders running the Department, something that the lack of attention to ongoing needs undercut. Like others, however, these participants acknowledged that this was not an unusual feature of appointee-career relations in the State Department, as a mid-level FSO (FSC33) observed, "they're committed, but from what I've seen, senior leaders focus 95% of their energy on policy and only 5% on developing their people, which they leave to M [the Undersecretary for Management]." Another, more senior, FSO (FSC29) was more pointed in criticizing the actions of appointed leaders, saying:

> *It's a lot of lip service…a few are genuine in wanting to do some things, but it doesn't push down. They're unwilling to make decisions that could reflect badly on them, or they're not well-equipped to handle the stress of their roles.*

Some participants connected the lack of care devoted to the Department as an institution with a growing sense that shifts in demographics and professional expectations were beginning to damage the ability to recruit and retain the talent necessary to carry out presidential priorities. Several participants shared concerns over the "next generation" of career employees being unwilling to accept the common mantras of "worldwide availability" for officers and the "needs of the service" as paramount. Too often, they said, the Department seemed to rely on a never-ending supply of eager FSO and civil service candidates who would accept any assignment with gratitude – times had changed,

though State's leadership seemed either unaware of, or unmoved by, that reality. A career member of the Senior Foreign Service (CSC03) shared that concern, observing:

> *You can't beat the mission, right? There's a lot of frustration, but it's in part a weakness of the organization because it can get in the trap of taking advantage of a bunch of do-gooders committed to the mission of the Department. And so, I think that's something that leadership needs to keep in mind is that you can't just count on maintaining just amazing cadre of foreign service and civil service officers just because it's just about the most unimpeachable mission possible. So, I think that's always something to keep in mind. You need to actively work to make this a good place to work as well as a place that has a good mission.*

The lack of readiness for – and sensitivity to – the level of responsibility for the well-being of the organization entrusted upon them was another common complaint about many appointees. Some participants noted that among each cohort of appointees were usually a few who seem exceptionally young or professionally inexperienced to take on policy-informing roles within the Department and that, often, these appointees would have outsized expectations about the level of deference due to them by virtue of their title alone. The difference between the backgrounds of these appointees and the level of experience expected of career officers competing to fill roles of similar responsibility were significant, a frustrating inequality only exacerbated by a sense by many participants that they – as career employees – were held to much higher standards of performance and accountability than their appointed peers. The lack of understanding of the realities of the personal challenges and sacrifices that could accompany being a career employee in the State Department, especially for those in the Foreign Service, was frequently cited as a major contributor to their doubt over appointees' commitment to the organization beyond its being a mechanism for achieving explicit policy goals.

Attitudes towards individual appointees were decidedly mixed, usually depending on how closely a participant had worked with an appointed leader. Those who had never worked in the immediate orbit of an appointee were more likely to speak in broad generalizations about those leaders and to presume "positive" intentions towards the Department and its career staff. Among those who had been closer to appointees, opinions tended towards more neutral or negative views based on the factors raised earlier in this section. There was one significant exception, though: the frequent references to former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was raised in nearly a third of all interviews (31%) as the archetypal effective State Department leader. Participants pointed to Powell's embodiment of the many traits they associated with the best of leaders, including his charisma, "high sense" of personal ethics, trust and empowerment of staff, and willingness to defend them and their actions. Secretary Powell's commitment to his team was palpable, even to junior staff, as a retired career ambassador (FSF05) explained:

> *Even though I was far away in the field, we understood that in his leadership that number one was taking care of people. And having their backs. And it started with him, having our backs. And we were expected to model that leadership and management in our own spheres. And situations. So, in my own case, I felt that empowered, you know. He expected us to take responsibility but to enjoy all the authority that comes with the position. And to have his confidence in doing that, that is absolutely critical, especially…in a crisis situation.*

The influence of Powell's approach to leadership was remarkable in that several of those who invoked him when discussing ideal leaders had joined the Department *after* his tenure ended in January 2005, in some case several years later. The reverence with which he was discussed was particularly notable in contrast to other Secretaries, who were rarely referenced by name with the exception of recent former Secretaries Rex

Tillerson and Mike Pompeo. A number of participants spoke about the challenges of their tenures at State, which was characterized by an extreme level of distrust displayed by both Secretaries and the appointees working around them. While study participants noted that some appointee distrust in the motives or actions of careerists was not uncommon, there was a sense that Tillerson and Pompeo's animosity toward career staff was significantly greater than in previous administrations and that they were more willing to express it openly. The Tillerson era, which lasted a little over 13 months, was uniformly miserable for career employees, who used words like "abuse," "destruction," and "malevolent" to describe a period that was marked with proposed budget cuts of 50% and a "hostile predisposition toward careers" from the start.

Compounding the antagonistic atmosphere around Secretary Tillerson was a perception among some participants that he "basically had no clue how to work with the White House or how to work with this president [Trump]" (FSF12). When discussing appointees within the Department, several participants balanced their criticisms with pragmatism, recognizing that some appointees could have an outsized ability to access resources or pull attention to particular issues within State depending on the nature of their relationship with the president or other key administration officials. While those ties did not excuse abusive or unethical behaviors, using them to advance Departmental goals could mitigate some frustrations arising from appointees resisting operating within the boundaries of the organizational norms. One public diplomacy officer (FSC26) shared an experience with an appointee ambassador who was willing to garner significant resources for an international exhibition because of his personal interest in showcasing his home state, which increased the overall U.S. contribution to a degree the career officer had not

been able to reach on their own. Several participants pointed to the criticality of the Secretary's having a strong working relationship with the president under whom they serve to being an effective advocate for the Department's abilities and needs. As Tillerson was perceived as unable to work productively within the Trump Administration, career employees were unwilling to accept the abuse they experienced as an unfortunate but necessary trade-off for getting what resources the Department's leaders needed to execute its mission effectively.

This utilitarian approach to viewing political appointees was evident in many interviews. In addition to having influence with the president and his administration, "good" appointees were those who wielded a lot of influence on behalf of the Department, particularly with Congress and the interagency. The latter was especially important to career employees who saw State as being pushed further and further out of the policymaking process in favor of the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community. More than half of the participants raised relations with Congress as critical to senior-level leader success as the Hill controlled budgeting and exercised significant oversight over several State areas of responsibility, such as visa issuance, foreign assistance, and weapons transfers (Rosenburg, 2017). While several participants noted that the Department's leaders could not control the budgetary process, they asserted that it could – and *should* – "influence" how their requests were viewed by "making the right arguments" to Congress and ensuring they were "effective at explaining" State's role in foreign policy. A secretary with strong ties to the administration would be, they said, in the best position to advocate on behalf of the Department and its needs; therefore, those who were less influential in their respective

administrations than a secretary like Colin Powell were viewed even more negatively than those who occasionally behaved badly or relied too exclusively on a cadre of other appointees.

A final aspect to appointee influence stemmed from the institutionalized use of appointments itself. As one career ambassador described, there is a perception among some host countries that, because an ambassador is understood to be the president's "personal representative," they must be extremely close to the president and have direct access to the president at all times. Therefore, it could be viewed in some countries as an insult if the U.S. ambassador was *not* a political appointee, as designating a career official suggested the country was not important enough for the president to send a personal confidant. In other words, after decades of appointing supposed insiders to certain countries, it could be damaging to relations with those countries if an experienced professional diplomat was dispatched instead of a diplomatic amateur. Immediacy to the president – whether real or only perceived – could be an important factor in an officer's ability to get the attention of host-country leaders, a practical consideration that many participants acknowledged in their discussions of appointee leaders.

Summary

The attitudes expressed by the study's participants covered wide range of opinions, beliefs, and suppositions based on both their expected and actual experiences as career members of the Department of State. Taken together, however, themes emerged that demonstrated the importance of certain behaviors in shaping dynamics between individuals and throughout the organization. In particular, participants' thoughts on leadership revealed significant divergence between their expressed preferences and their lived reality. The characteristics they most commonly associated with effective

leadership – especially trust, respect, expertise, and emotional intelligence – were often found wanting among both career and appointee leaders. As a result, many participants formed negative opinions about the organization's ability to deliver capable leadership and, through their words, often connected those beliefs with their attitudes towards the organization itself and their place within it. While these dynamics can exist in any organization, the additional challenges posed with reliance on outsiders for leadership that is so common in U.S. federal agencies often seemed to amplify their effects. The implications for the organization and the people who work within it are explored in detail in the following discussion chapter.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Overview

Throughout the interviews, participants described experiencing challenges in leadership while serving in the U.S. Department of State. Those problems include leadership they viewed as mediocre or of poor quality, a lack of development of their own leadership skills and abilities, and a widely shared belief that the Department's leaders are unable or unwilling to address these issues. In response, some of the participants chose to separate from State before reaching retirement eligibility, usually pursuing opportunities outside of government itself. Those in active service at the time of their interviews expressed frustration, disappointment, and – at times – anger that the Department's management seems unable to reverse the pattern of poor leadership. Drawing on the themes raised by the participants, there are three elements of the organization's structure that appear in connection with this dynamic: (1) lack of control over the agency's access to resources; (2) senior leadership drawn predominantly from outside the organization with minimal time or interest in addressing the issues driving leadership quality; and (3) exacerbating effects of time-boundedness of both the political appointees and the members of the Foreign Service that limits effectiveness throughout the organization. Taken together, they paint a dismal picture of an organization that struggles to communicate its needs to those in positions of sufficient power to enable fundamental changes to meet modern workplace challenges.

The underlying message from the participants' perspectives is that the constant change in leadership through the use of political appointments at State has a negative relationship with its ability to recruit, develop, and retain the workforce necessary to

execute its foreign affairs mission. Emanating from that primary position are three major sub-themes that provide examples of these dynamics. The first focuses on organizational members' attitudes and their understanding of the agency they have chosen to join. This can be seen in their expectations while moving through the hiring process as well as their knowledge of the processes that drive the Department's operations. The motives that contribute to major decisions regarding their connection with the organization are also important to understand, as they directly connect with self-reported participant behaviors while in the Department. These begin with participants' reasons for joining State in the first place and carry through decisions about whether to remain until eligible for retirement or separate voluntarily at some point along the way. These attitudes and their associated behaviors are important for gauging the level of organizational commitment and buy-in among members, as well as whether that commitment is contingent on factors within the control of the Department. Through their interviews, participants suggested that they believe State's leaders have much more control than they exercise, which results in frustration and a shift towards a decidedly transactional approach to members' relationships with the Department.

A second critical thematic area concerns the dynamics around leadership as it is both experienced and practiced by the members. Many participants expressed concerns about the quality of leadership they experienced personally working under both appointee and career leaders. Almost all of the study participants preferred to work for career leaders who understand the organizational context and processes that directly affect participants' ability to execute their roles effectively, even when those career leaders' own performance was considered sub-par. Importantly, the profiles participants drew

when discussing the traits and behaviors they seek in leaders – an important variable in an organization where more than half of the employees are able to select their assignments – diverged from what they described actually encountering during their time in the organization, a dynamic that participants attributed to the overall lack of attention and prioritization of developing key leadership competencies *before* an individual encumbers a role of responsibility. Both of these elements were critical from the member perspective, as leaders can significantly influence those members' attitudes and performance through the informal approach to socialization to organizational norms that takes place in the organization. Taken together, these factors have led many of participants to conclude that those who steer the Department do not care about the quality of leadership and, as a result, those who remain in the organization long-term can rely only on themselves to develop their own capabilities and avoid serving under poor leaders.

A final sub-theme concerns the use of political appointments to fill leadership positions within the State Department. While all participants acknowledged a president's prerogative to select those whom he or she believes to be best able to execute on their policy agenda, they pointed to several issues that may contribute to the careerists' ability to carry out their own roles. Participants described working for leaders ill-prepared for the roles they encumbered, hampered by their assumptions of the transferability of their skills (especially among those drawn from outside government), and a lack of understanding of the requirements and limits of their positions. Many participants shared perceptions of appointees' self-serving motives and entitled attitudes that have strained relations with career staffers, many of whom felt pushed aside in favor of other

appointees with far less experience or expertise in the relevant areas. Even those appointees who entered the Department with an open mind and eagerness to learn could face a very steep learning curve with a clock that began running from the very first day, as several participants noted. As a result, organizational effectiveness can be severely hampered by outsiders' inability to navigate the bureaucracy or exert influence in the broader government unless they bring pre-existing relationships with the interagency, the presidential administration, or Congress. While participants noted the outside perspectives, commitment to innovation, and access to resources that some appointees brought with them, others pointed to the inefficiencies that can plague the organization when each leadership role turns over every few years, a dynamic often magnified by many careerists' own short tenures in their roles.

What emerges from the study participants is an agency in a slow-motion crisis, one that recognizes its predicament but is unable to address it effectively due to a (perceived) lack of interest or energy among those in the most senior leadership roles for any issues that do not directly relate to presidential policy priorities. The State Department, especially in the Foreign Service, still operates much as it did during the second half of the twentieth century, when new officers typically joined early in their professional careers, spent 30 years moving up through the ranks, and embraced a service mentality throughout their tenures that subordinated their own preferences or benefit to the "needs of the service." Navigating the complexity of the modern foreign policy realm requires a wide range of skills acquired over time; an organization that is unable to provide ongoing training and mentorship to develop and refine those skills risks irrelevancy. The themes emerging from this study's participants suggest that the State

Department is at great risk of losing the ability to build and maintain the workforce necessary to execute its mission due to an inability to address long-standing problems in how the organization is structured and operates, regardless of which administration is in charge. To explore these dynamics, I will the three main sub-themes in more detail, including member attitudes and understanding of State, leadership dynamics and their effects, and perceptions associated with political appointees. Then, I will demonstrate how three particular organizational elements at the Department of State – level of control, politicization, and time-boundedness – can contribute to the dynamics raised in the three sub-themes.

Member Attitudes and Understanding

Expectations of the organization and its operations

During the interviews, many participants express a lack of organizational knowledge before joining the Department, particularly among the foreign service officers. In some cases, this was attributed to their lack of connection with the Department, such as not having a family member or friend who was part of State, prior to embarking on the application process. For those participants who joined State before widespread internet use in the late 1990's, which was the case for 17% of the subject pool, there were few avenues to "research" the Department, its operations, and the realities of career service outside of a personal connection or enrollment in a university international relations program. Warwick's (1975) examination of the State Department, *A Theory of Public Bureaucracy,* is decidedly academic in tone and does not attempt to frame the Department from an aspiring member's perspective; it is also far more reflective of the mid-century organization, one in which FSOs' wives' performances as

hostesses were graded and added to the officers' annual performance evaluations, than diplomacy in the twenty-first century. Importantly, Warwick's goal was to use the archetypal bureaucracy of the Department to demonstrate more general dynamics of organizational politics at play in the federal government rather than provide insights into a particular agency. However, a key argument by Warwick was that true understanding of public bureaucracies required accounting for both the institutional and political elements that can influence how the agency operates and to what degree changes in those operations are likely to revert to their prior form (Warwick, 1975).

Contemporaneously with Warwick, Hilton (1978) presents a compilation of first-person "what I do in the Foreign Service" stories in *Tales of the Foreign Service* that offers a quaint reflection of mid-century federal bureaucracy. Its contributors were born between 1905 and 1933 and spent their careers in a State Department in which female FSOs were forced to resign on marrying, the few minority officers were relegated to a separate area of the Foreign Service Institute lunchroom, and the primary focus of U.S. foreign policy was containment of the Soviet Union through exportation of U.S.-style democracy and capitalism (Hilton, 1978). Only one of the 18 writers included was female: the wife of a career ambassador who "made interesting friends all around the world" through her hobby of operating a ham radio (Hilton, 1978, p. 161). For twenty-first century aspiring foreign service officers, these books offer few insights into the daily reality of the foreign service, and the civil service functions of the Department receive even sparser attention.

The advent of the information age, the internet, and telecommunications capabilities that can connect individuals around the globe should improve potential State

employees' ability to learn about the Department. However, a surprising number those who joined in more recent years also did not know much about the routine operations of the Department before starting their tenures and how it would affect them personally, especially those who came from the private sector. The effects of this lack of organizational knowledge linked with their expressed attitudes and descriptions of beliefs about the Department and its leadership. One phenomenon that demonstrates this well is the unexpectedly high rate of dissatisfaction with their chosen career track among the Foreign Service generalists in the study. Department procedure requires FSO generalist candidates to select their preferred "cone" when beginning the hiring process, and official guidance stresses that conal changes are "seldom approved, so applicants should be sure to choose the cone that they believe will be the best fit for them" (Department of State, 2015). However, nearly a quarter of the FSO generalist members of the study participant pool (8 of 33, 24.2%) had requested a cone change during their careers, suggesting several dynamics of interest. First, FSO generalist applicants may have insufficient information on which to base their choice of cones during the hiring process, leading to misalignment of skills, abilities, and interest in the day-to-day reality of serving in roles assigned to those tracks. Second, the change process is difficult and not guaranteed; an FSO can only apply to change their cone after completing a minimum of three years *after tenure* serving in roles assigned to the desired new cone. Therefore, at a minimum, FSOs must serve six to eight years in their "wrong" cone before even attempting to change, though several participants said their own process took several years to accomplish after becoming eligible. This suggests that a sizeable portion of FSO generalists performs functions for which they believe themselves to be ill-suited, which could lead to

underperformance, disengagement, or even voluntary separation. The result of those dynamics, which could be characterized as a lack of person-job fit, may lead to tangible negative outcomes for the Department as effort and performance could both decline.

Another area in which many participants lacked organizational knowledge before joining concerned their beliefs about the State Department's role in the broader foreign policy apparatus. Several participants expressed disappointment that, rather than leading policy development and decision-making, State is often relegated to carrying out the priorities pushed by those on the National Security Council, in the Department of Defense, or in the intelligence community. Even some of the core functions of the Department have been suggested for removal from State, such as visa application adjudications. During the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) following the 9/11 terror attacks, there was serious discussion about moving the adjudication function to DHS, and, more recently, officials in both the executive and legislative branches have explored using online platforms, such as videoconferencing, to reduce or eliminate the need for consular officers to be located overseas (EveryCRSReport.com, 2014; Anderson, 2018). Study participants expressed frustration and disappointment at the mismatch between their expectations of State's role and the lived experience which, for some, made them question what their work actually accomplished in relation to policy execution. While only a few participants cited this lack of alignment as a reason for their decision to separate prematurely from the Department, its persistence – even in today's hyper-connected environment – suggests that State is not communicating clearly to potential organizational members the scope of its role in the foreign policy process, and that opacity seems to contribute to many members uncoupling

their choice to stay in the agency from its mission and turn to more instrumental justifications.

Motives: known and perceived

Interestingly, this instrumentality seems to be part of a common arc among members regarding their motives for joining and remaining with the Department. Contrary to expectations, the majority of study participants did not cite a public service- or mission-oriented reason for pursuing a position with the Department. The most commonly given motive for joining State, the desire to live and/or work outside the United States, points to a decidedly self-centered orientation that clashes with an organizational ethos based on the "needs of the Service." Those who said the opportunity to serve the public drove their decision to join typically had a family connection to service, such as the U.S. military or in other federal agencies, or were beneficiaries themselves of particular public services, including first-generation immigrants to the United States with a desire to "give back." However, the majority of study participants based their decision to join the Department on decidedly instrumental factors, suggesting that the tangible benefits of a Foreign Service life are key to attracting applicants, a dynamic seemingly unacknowledged by the Department leadership. As a civil service participant (CSC01) noted:

> *I think it [the State Department] believes that it is going to always have a pool of people to draw from. There will always be people, recent grads wanting to join the State Department because of its history, because of its prestigious reputation, because of what it does overseas. And I think it banks on the fact that there will always be people who are more interested in working there than they are in work-life balance or than they are in a huge paycheck.*

That the underlying mission of the Department was not the key draw – at least, not in the beginning – is a very surprising outcome of the interviews, yet it does not suggest that the participants are any less interested in doing their jobs well than those with a more public-service orientation. Indeed, the responses to interview questions probing level of work engagement were uniformly positive, with all 42 participants drawing direct connections between their current roles (former roles for those who are no longer in the Department) and State's overall mission. This ability to situate one's own contribution toward shared goals is a hallmark of work engagement and demonstrates how well each participant has become integrated into the organizational fabric (Kahn, 1990). To understand the implications of this, it is important to shift focus from why study participants joined State to what motivates them to *stay* in the organization. Some of those whose entry was driven by instrumental factors found themselves staying longer than they expected due to mission buy-in. As a senior FSO generalist (FSC17) said, "this [State] is the only place to 'do' foreign policy," a sentiment shared by many and given as the reason why they chose to stay in the Department past the "few years or tours" they had originally expected.

For many participants, then, their embrace of the organization's mission was an important aspect in choosing to stay in their roles at State. For others, however, the reasons remained decidedly instrumental, though with more variety. Similar to entry motives, the opportunity to live and/or travel internationally was central for the majority of career foreign service officers in the study, and the civil service participants also enjoyed more travel opportunities than many in the private sector. Civil servants at the State Department can also apply for occasional overseas assignments, either on

temporary duty to support foreign-based post staffing needs or in foreign service-designated roles that are unsuccessful in attracting qualified bidders, usually in hard-to-staff parts of the world. The fringe benefits associated with working in the Department, for both civil and foreign service, were persuasive to many who might have considered separating before reaching retirement age. For FSOs, the financial implications of having their living expenses paid while overseas, full retirement eligibility once passing 20 years of service and the age of 50, and paid tuition at well-regarded international schools for their children can be tremendous and impossible to replicate outside of the Foreign Service. For some families, the fringe benefits in the Foreign Service make it possible to live comfortably on a single salary, something far more difficult to accomplish stateside.

Beyond the personal benefits, the job-related opportunities afforded to careerists at State can be varied and rewarding. The opportunities to execute programs on the frontlines, participate in major international events, and assist American citizens abroad allow career members of the Department to develop a range of skill sets and experiences that are unmatched in federal service. Study participants describe participating in negotiations on behalf of U.S. positions on a range of issues, designing the U.S. pavilion at international expos, representing the United States at official events, and finding creative ways to explain the U.S. approach to governance to audiences ranging from schoolchildren to national assemblies, often in the host country's language. The pride in this work was obvious throughout the members of the pool. However, what was also obvious was how much the work itself – rather than the mission it serves – was what they find exciting, as many discussed how, when considering what assignments to pursue when bidding, they want to be challenged and excited by *what* they do, not *why* they do

it. Whether or not they "buy in" to State's mission seemed to be a secondary concern from what actually engages them: interesting and rewarding work that uses their existing skills and allows them to develop new ones.

Converting from instrumental motives to mission-based intentions and back again to tangible benefits was a recurring theme among many of the study participants, representing the motivational "arc" referenced earlier in this section. This reality has several implications for the State Department in engaging and motivating its workforce. The first concerns both recruitment and retention. Clearly, the majority of participants had little to no understanding of what they were undertaking by choosing a career in the State Department, especially those in the Foreign Service, risking potential mismatch of expectations and misunderstanding of roles, which could explain why so many participants found themselves in the "wrong" cone. How much productivity did the organization potentially lose in the years those officers worked in roles for which they believed themselves not to be best suited? Would they have disengaged from their work or even left the Department if they were unsuccessful in changing their cones? A related concern is the number of participants whose unrealistic expectations led them to pursue assignments that, in the end, they decided had not been in their best interests. Several participants shared that, in hindsight, they would have bid very differently if they had known more about how the Department "really works," by putting their own interests or preferences ahead of other factors.

The Departmental ethos is decidedly normative – the "needs of the service" are paramount and are invoked to justify exceptions to the many rules guiding foreign and civil service careers. However, the members of its workforce who participated in this

study seemed to be predominantly instrumental in their orientation, prioritizing the desires of themselves and their immediate family members in many of the career decisions they made. This represents a significant clash, as Department leadership may not recognize that recruitment and retention does not hinge on a passion for public service, leading them to highlight the wrong factors that can persuade careerists to remain for the long-term instead of focusing on facilitating access to the benefits and opportunities that actually motivate them. After all, there is nothing inherently wrong with an individual remaining in public service for the personal benefits, provided they execute their role effectively. Presuming that connection to the underlying mission will outweigh other, more tangible factors may have contributed to the position in which the Department's leaders finds themselves today, with declining applications to the Foreign Service and current employees expressing concern about the attractiveness of the career to the next generation (Rubin, 2023).

As some participants noted, the Foreign Service's precepts – the formal criteria on which tenure and promotion decisions are based – explicitly frame the expectation that new entrants can/will serve "a full career" of up to 30 years. With almost all FSOs starting at the entry level and moving up over decades, there is no consideration of how the Department's managers can take advantage of the skillsets associated with mid-career entrants or get maximum output from those who only want to remain at State for a few years before moving on to something else. While there have been attempts at "lateral entries," which allow certain individuals to enter at the mid- rather than the entry level, in the past, most career employees viewed them as "not having paid their dues" in entry-level directed assignments, especially consular service for non-consular-coned

generalists, and mid-level entrants have remained rare in the Foreign Service. A failure to recognize some of the underlying motives for why many individuals join and remain with the State Department seems to impede the organization's ability to make strategic choices that will appeal to those motives. If many careerists are driven by tangible personal benefits, the Department's leadership needs to ensure it is doing everything within its power to maximize access to those benefits rather than relying on platitudes and presumptions of overriding public service motivation.

Based on the participants' descriptions, it is possible to identify a number of pain points that may discourage stay decisions; importantly, all of these relate to the structure of the organization itself. The first of these is the reality that, for members of the Foreign Service, their connection with the Department is much deeper than merely employer-employee. The Foreign Service is a lifestyle, with direct effects on every member of the officer's immediate family and, in some case, extended family. These impacts can be exacerbated over time as family composition – and their related needs – change. That many FSOs enter single – and nearly a third remain that way throughout their tenures – certainly influences their approach to managing their career and lifestyle expectations (Thompson, 2018). For married/partnered FSOs, the challenges of navigating their own career while ensuring their partner can do the same can be daunting; adding children to equation, whether the FSO is married or single, can exponentially increase the complexity of factors to be considered when contemplating assignments, career paths, and focus areas. Participants frequently tied the length of their tenures to "as long as my family likes this," with several expressing frustration with what they viewed as overly bureaucratic and outdated processes that add significant stress on top of already trying

situations involving their families, including the extended hours many are expected to work without additional compensation (tenured FSO positions are classified as exempt under the *Fair Labor Standards Act*).

Many participants highlighted a second major pain point: the constancy of change and its effects on how they view the Department and its commitment to their development. Non-stop rotations of assignments, leadership, and team composition created tension, barriers to effectiveness, and decreased ability to chart a "progressive" path forward for themselves. These rotations affected both foreign and civil service employees, as even offices predominantly staffed with civil servants usually have a handful of foreign service positions within them, and all bureaus, divisions, and offices can be led by political appointees who are also time limited. At overseas posts, positions are typically on different rotational cycles to prevent entire teams from turning over at the same time; there are two main transfer periods, and assignment lengths can range from one to three years. As a result, the ability to build team cohesion and perform effectively can be undermined by the insufficiency of time to create trust bonds and develop critical skills. In addition, the assignment cycle takes place at least a year before a position turns over, meaning that those responsible for selecting the "right" candidate may never work with that individual and, therefore, has no direct accountability if their selection fails to perform effectively.

This last dynamic highlights another challenge related to the constant change inherent at State. As many participants pointed out, the current promotion and assignment structures for the Foreign Service can lead to poor performers – and especially poor leaders – moving on from bad situations without having their deficiencies or bad

behaviors addressed. Promotion decisions are based solely on the annual EER performance evaluation, the writing of which is managed by the evaluated employee. Many participants referred to a common Department truism that those evaluations are "fine works of fiction" that describe all employees in glowing terms not always grounded in reality and that success in promotion is related not to actual performance but the ability to write well. On the other hand, assignments are, according to several participants, based more on "who you know" than "what you can do," and the decentralized approach to bidding and assignments can prevent decision makers from identifying problematic employees. Interestingly, the aforementioned performance evaluations are *not* included in evaluating FSO bidders. Finally, the documentation requirements for addressing performance issues can be lengthy and contentious, leading many career employees to "wait out" poor performers rather than embark confront problems directly.

This aversion to dealing with the challenging process of performance management is similar the risk avoidance that many associated with "successful" careerists who always "do a quick calculation as to [if this] could come back to bite me," as a retired FSO (FSF07) put it. The importance placed on one's "corridor reputation" was seen by many as a rewarding risk avoidance with key assignments that can set up officers for promotion and further plum roles. Rather than inculcate the courage, determination, and embrace of innovation that so many participants seek in their leaders, the system of relying on subjective opinions of a few peers in making assignments seemed to do the opposite. The study participants often pointed to this dynamic to explain their frustration with leadership quality and their *own* development as future leaders; in an environment where socialization is based on informal mentoring from more senior

leaders, the pressure to embrace organizational norms can be extremely strong to the point that many participants subtly endorsed those processes while decrying their effects. Junior employees who were eager to climb up the ranks of responsibility modeled themselves on those who were seen as very successful, inferring that the behaviors they observed in those more senior members were responsible for their reputations.

As noted earlier, however, the behaviors participants sought in their "ideal" leaders often diverged from they actually encountered and, in many cases, incorporated into their own approach to their work, consciously or otherwise. The implications for the organization are clear: Department managements' ability to assemble productive, supportive teams is negatively related to the very structures and methods they employ to do so. As many participants pointed out, even when they sought to work under leaders who embodied the empathetic, supportive, transparent ideal (such as bidding on an assignment solely for the chance to work for – and learn from – a strong leader), factors outside of their control could stand in the way. Assignments could be extended or officers curtailed from them prematurely to meet the needs of the service, address unexpected medical or family issues, or if a more senior leader, like a political appointee ambassador, dismissed them from post. Working within these systematic challenges led many to conclude that the organization does not care about individual employee development – including theirs – and, therefore, all career progression must be driven by their own ability to navigate an environment that many did not truly understand and for which they received minimal guidance unless "lucky enough" to be informally mentored by more senior colleagues.

The deleterious effects of constant change were not limited to individual performance. The ability of teams, such as at an overseas mission or in a Washington-based office, to execute their functions and achieve shared goals also reflected the negative effects associated with the relentless cycling of staff. Short assignments, particularly those less than two years, did not allow sufficient time to advance beyond basic proficiency in roles, a dynamic amplified by the likelihood of no overlap between the outgoing and incoming officers, forcing the latter to rely on any notes drafted by the former. Scholars have demonstrated that it can take *up to two years* for a new team member to perform to expectations when hired into a role for which they have the requisite training and skillset (Bidwell, 2011). For career State employees, those two years can be the *entirety* of their tenure in a particular role, so that just as they reach competency, it is time to move on again. Even when there is forward progress on work, it can be inefficient, especially in resource usage, as newly arrived officers try to work to their predecessors' goals and plans. Team cohesion is often disrupted by rotations, with high-functioning teams subject to losing strong members and gaining new colleagues similarly subject to the effects described by Bidwell (2011). Of course, rotations can have their benefits if a poor performer or toxic colleague departs before others on the team. Overall, however, these dynamics can feed feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction with personal performance, perceptions of team performance, and ability to achieve mission goals, failures that several participants suggested were the result of senior leadership's inability to look beyond the immediate policy agenda. As one senior-level FSO (FSC02) said, "The Department cares about substance, but it doesn't pay attention to how officers do things. And the *how* is just as important as the *what*."

These dynamics coalesced into a force that shifted the attitudes of many career employees toward the choices will benefit themselves or their families and away from the needs of the Department and, by extension, the presidential administration. That many of these pressures – disruptions in family dynamics, challenges with spousal career aspirations, the sense of never performing to one's capabilities, lack of formal guidance on navigating the career – were long-standing and well known in the Department only added to the frustration many participants expressed. Some were decidedly pragmatic: as one career ambassador (FSC08) said, "You can give everything to the Department, but it will never love you back. You have to get okay with that." Others focused on what they could control and maximizing its utility for themselves and their families. Some separated from the Department, unable to reconcile the divergence between the expectation and the reality. With these dynamics, it is possible the Department's overall ability to perform can be impeded as it struggles to get the right individual with the right skillsets in the right position at the right time. The urgent demands of modern foreign policy simply do not reward such deliberate, thoughtful approaches to staffing decisions beyond key leadership roles, so the vast majority of career employees may be left to their own devices to forge a career path that rewards their abilities and provides opportunities to advance in experience and responsibility.

Leadership Dynamics

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe what behaviors they sought in leaders or, to put it another way, what behaviors led to "effective" leadership in their eyes. Their responses were remarkably consistent: they wanted leaders to be emotionally intelligent, respectful of their team members as both human beings and as

contributors to shared goals, committed to their followers' development, and humble enough to recognize they (the leaders) always have more to learn. In addition, many participants sought leaders who were brave enough to challenge the status quo, offer a dissenting opinion, and "have our backs" when decisions went sideways. These characteristics and traits are not unexpected: in fact, they are remarkably similar to those expressed by workers across industries and sectors. What is more surprising is how frequently these depictions were followed by admissions that, during their tenures at State, participants had encountered leaders who did *not* display these behaviors far more often than the reverse. In an organization that touts itself as attracting the "best and brightest," its leadership seems to fall short of meeting its workforce's needs a shockingly high percentage of the time, a dynamic that, based on the participants' characterization, is powered directly *and* indirectly by the continuous use of outside appointees to fill senior leadership roles.

There is a mismatch in what constituted "leadership capability" between career staff and appointees, though actual selection for leadership positions is not as different as many participants believe. In the study, many participants raised concerns about what factors actually "qualify" an appointee for a leadership role, which they viewed as weighed more heavily towards personal connections with the administration than demonstrated subject matter expertise or relevant experience. Political donors, friends or family of administration officials, and long-time party supporters are often placed into roles of responsibility. While Schedule C appointees, who do not require Senate confirmation, are not placed in "policy-informing" roles, they often supervise career employees and/or oversee program execution; therefore, their readiness for such

functions should be a consideration in their appointment. Too often, participants complained, their only "qualification" is their connection to the president's party or personal network.

Even among the PAS appointees, there can be little objective criteria on which to evaluate the adequacy of their preparation to assume their roles, particularly when considering ambassadorial appointments. As the case of Obama-era appointee Colleen Bell demonstrates, simply being "who the president wants" can be the only bar an appointee must clear to be confirmed. Bell, a longtime Democratic donor and television soap opera producer, infamously stumbled during her confirmation hearing, unable to explain the United States' relationship with Hungary – the country to which she had been named ambassador – and naming the wrong city as its capital; her appointment was confirmed along a party-line vote (Saenz, 2014). In contrast, career ambassadors typically spend more than 20 years working up through the State Department before even being considered for high-level appointments. The minimum qualifications for consideration for promotion into the Senior Foreign Service, from which career ambassadors are drawn, include: at least 12 years of service (assuming an officer is tenured and promoted at every first opportunity, which is exceptionally rare); demonstrated proficiency of at least one foreign language; service in positions that are assigned to both the officer's cone and at least one "out-of-cone" assignment; and demonstrated leadership capabilities, including prior supervision of career staff (USDOS, 2023).

In many participants' eyes, this "mismatch" in qualifications for leadership roles between career officers and political appointees contributes to an overall sense that the Department leaders are unable or unwilling to address leadership quality concerns

systematically. While poorly prepared or underqualified appointees are problematic in their own regard, the reliance on so many appointees can contribute negatively in less direct ways. As several participants noted, appointees are perceived by careerists as solely focused on immediate policy execution, a function that they said is inhibited by the lack of attention to developing the necessary skills among the workforce more broadly, including creating the cadre of career leaders the Department's leadership needs to carry out that policy and fill critical roles throughout the organization. While many participants believed that the current cohort of appointee leaders making policy decisions in Washington want to improve leadership development at State, they pointed out that those leaders lack the resources – time, training float, administration attention, financial resources, etc. – to make actual change possible. That the next election cycle could start the acclimation process of new appointees who may or may not have any interest in strengthening the Department was a constant undercurrent for career employees, leading many to conclude that the circumstances will never truly change.

The ongoing challenge in developing the necessary leadership capabilities among career employees seems to be exacerbated by issues with appointee leaders. While some participants pointed out that appointees can often leverage their relationships with the administration or Congress to access additional resources, investing in long-term development was never an appointee priority. The expansion of the Foreign Service workforce advocated by former Secretary Powell nearly 20 years ago has been undercut by recurring hiring freezes and high numbers of voluntary separations (including retirements) during the last presidential administration; as a result, the Department is currently understaffed and, according to several participants, finds itself unable to staff all

of its existing positions much less create the "float" necessary to permit in-depth training. Many participants compared State negatively to the Department of Defense's training and development strategy, which uses a systematic approach to ensure candidates for promotion and assignments hold the requisite skills *before* assuming higher levels of responsibility. Both DOD and the Foreign Service employ an up-or-out model, but only at State are employees commonly forced into taking leadership positions whether ready, willing, or even interested in supervising teams or projects and without a standardized minimum level of formal preparation.

Adding to these challenges is the reality that the current performance management and assignments systems in the Department do not allow for consistent identification of poor or unprepared leaders, nor are there centralized mechanisms in place to address these deficiencies. While the Department often touts an individual's "corridor reputation" as a guard against bad leaders assuming roles of responsibility, the lack of transparency in assignments and reliance on "lobbying" by highly placed career officials in making final assignment decisions belies the oft-repeated truism that "evaluations get you promoted, and your reputation gets you jobs." The many references to Secretary Powell, including by those who joined the Department after his tenure, highlighted how much State's career employees yearned for senior leadership that prioritizes the entire workforce's well-being and needs over short-term policy execution. By failing to follow Powell's example, today's appointee leaders may unintentionally reinforce a widely held belief among participants that organizational leaders are either unable or unwilling to invest adequately in employee development because they do not care about leadership quality generally or assumes that career leaders are "good enough" to get through the

one-to-three-year assignments. According to the study participants, however, "good enough" is simply not sufficient to maintain the commitment of the workforce or attract the "best and brightest" for the next generation.

The influence of leadership on member attitudes and performance seems to be either an overlooked or underestimated dynamic throughout the Department. Poor leadership, either by appointees or career staff, can undercut the creation and sustainment of trust in both leaders and the organization as a whole, which is critical to legitimizing the authority of those leaders. The study's participants understood that, by virtue of their selection by the administration, appointees fill formal roles of leadership, and there is no indication that careerists consciously rejected appointees' authority even when disagreeing with their decisions or dealing with toxic behaviors. However, the mismatch in leader characteristics between what careerists want and what they experience in leaders *can* lead to frustration, disappointment, and, in some cases, separation. For those who stay in the organization, however, these failings and the perceived lack of importance of leadership quality can contribute to a belief that the Department's leaders do not care about them or their development, and that they must "look out for themselves" as no one else will. These beliefs can degrade their commitment to the Department and its mission, undermine team cohesion, and reinforce assumptions that senior-level leaders, especially appointees, are motivated exclusively by personal concerns.

Perceptions of Appointees

When discussing the relationships between career employees and political appointees, as well as their observations of appointee behaviors, the study participants tended to differentiate between two groups: the "in-and-outers" and the beneficiaries of

political favors. The former group typically comprised those who are familiar with State and its operations by virtue of having previously served in appointed positions there or in affiliated agencies, such as the NSC staff or the Department of Defense. This group of appointees were presumed to have a higher degree of commitment to the organization due to the fact that, as one officer (FSC31) put it, "they come back again and again." Several participants made a similar connection with the "return visits" to the Department indicating their investment in the overall performance of the organization. However, even among the participants taking this generous view, there was an undercurrent of concern that appointees are too focused on the policy agenda to have time or energy to engage on the more complex issues facing the Department's leaders that have led so many to conclude there is no likelihood of meaningful change.

The presumption of commitment to State or, more broadly, a high degree of service orientation (even public-service motivation) among these particular appointees seemed to stem from the simple fact that they have worked in the Department previously as well as their willingness to "say the right things." When it came to tangible *evidence* of that commitment or motivation spurring work on behalf of lasting change at State, though, participants could offer little beyond their beliefs about those attitudes. And, for those career officers working in very senior positions themselves, the presumption disappeared completely, to be replaced by frustration and concern that the current cohort of appointees are actually expanding their numbers quietly, trusting only other appointees to carry out critical policy deliberations and decision-making. As officer said (FSC07) said, "A lot of them weren't that great the first time around [during the Obama Administration], and now they're back in charge." Those who were the most willing to

express conviction in leadership's commitment to the "care and feeding of the Department" were those with the most tenuous connection to them: those at the entry level; those who have served solely outside Washington; and those in the consular and management cones, whose work is much more focused on logistics and service delivery than policymaking. Those closest to the denizens of the Seventh Floor (the level of the Main State building where the most senior officials work) seemed to have a much clearer view of the dynamics at play, and they did not like what they saw.

When it came to the other group of appointees – the presumed beneficiaries of political favors – the participants were much more consistent in their attitudes. Throughout the study, participants complained about such appointees as motivated solely by whatever will best serve their own interests, whether moving up to a more prestigious position, parlaying their appointment into a role in a think tank or academia, or trying to convert to a career civil service position at State. Even those at higher levels who were less satisfied with the in-and-outers acknowledged that those appointees seem motivated primarily with executing the president's policy agenda and did not fault them for that, only that they had minimal interest or concern *beyond* checking items off that agenda. Their motivations, therefore, were laudable. Not so for the beneficiaries of political favors, who were perceived as self-centered, entitled, out of their depth, and generally unqualified for the positions in which they found themselves. Moreover, they seemed less willing than the in-and-outers to accept the advice and support, gained through years of experience, that State's career workforce offered to them; in some cases, this reluctance could take an uglier turn into rejection or even open hostility. While this was a well-reported dynamic with Trump Administration appointees, several participants quickly

pointed out that it occurs in all administrations to varying degrees and is simply less overt in some administrations than in others.

These differences in presumed motivations and intentions among political appointees highlights a few interesting parallels with how career officials see themselves. The most common reasons participants gave for joining and staying in the Department are decidedly instrumental in nature: wanting to live and/or work overseas; the financial impacts of not paying for housing costs when overseas; or the fringe benefits afforded to careerists, especially in the Foreign Service. That few participants pointed to a service inclination as their primary reason for joining State is surprising, given the prevailing literature on public service motivation (PSM), the fact that its employees swear an oath on entry, and the normative implications of the Department's mission "to protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive" (Department of State, n.d.1). However, many of these same career employees assumed that appointees – the in-and-outers, at least – join out of *their* desire to serve. Their logic was that these appointees *must* have high levels of PSM or they would not give up whatever professional role they filled previously and potentially disrupt their families' lives just to fill an appointed role for a few years.

That the appointees who return to the Department could be as transactional or self-serving as the political-favor beneficiaries did not seem to occur to the same career employees who framed their own decisions to join, stay, or depart State in decidedly instrumental term. The key differentiator seems to be who benefits from the appointee's work: the people of the United States of America (through policy agenda execution) or

the appointees themselves? However, multiple FSOs gave their own instrumental reasons for not wanting to work for, or directly under, a political appointee. These ranged from less positive outcomes for the Department as a whole by appointees who do not understand or value the work of careerists, to negative effects on the team such as destroying morale at an overseas post, to the decidedly personal: appointees are unlikely to be able or willing to lobby effectively for onward assignments on behalf of the FSOs who serve under them. There is nothing inherently wrong with members of a workforce being personally motivated by the tangible elements or benefits of their professional roles provided the organization recognizes this and structures itself to provide those benefits accordingly. A similar dynamic can be seen in career employees' beliefs about appointees' motivations, as many participants seemed to be more generous in their attitudes towards those appointees who they believed were at State for the "right" (public service) reasons, with much less patience for those who appeared to be concerned with self-promotion.

A final parallel can be seen in the perceived effects of the time-boundedness of appointee roles. Study participants, especially the FSOs, frequently cited this time-boundedness as a barrier to making lasting improvements to the Department, as appointees "don't have time" to focus on organizational change in their rush to execute the policy agenda or secure their next job before the end of the election cycle. Participants described appointees as "hitting the ground looking at the clock" with a "very short-term perspective" and running a dual track of "diligently working to have deliverables for this administration *and* diligently working for their next position" (CSC01). However, other participants used very similar language to describe FSOs' *own*

time-boundedness, with one referencing (FSC26) the "constant meter running in every foreign service officer's head of 'how long am I at post?'" The annual evaluation reports on which FSO promotions are based must describe, as concretely as possible, what the officer accomplishes in a set period in their current role, putting enormous pressure on FSOs to demonstrate tangible accomplishments constantly, which can be a challenge in one-year assignments or in roles that have a steeper learning curve, such as an out-of-cone assignment. The inhibition of lasting change many participants attributed to the brevity of individual political appointments seems to exist for many career employees, both the FSOs who frequently rotate and the civil servants who often work alongside them.

Yet another similarity can be seen in the widely held belief among career staff that appointees are unprepared – and, therefore, generally unable – to lead in the Department successfully. They cited several reasons for this deficiency, the first of which was an erroneous assumption of skill transferability based on a flawed understanding, or lack thereof, of the competencies necessary to lead effectively in the organization. Despite the pervasiveness of themes raised in the New Public Management literature, critical normative distinctions lay between for-profit and public-sector work, especially when navigating the complexities of multilateral foreign policy. More concretely, U.S. law explicitly prohibits many of the perquisites attached to high profile roles in the private sector, and the ubiquity of FOIA requests implies that behaviors that deviate from established organizational norms will eventually see the light of day. The lack of preparation is often compounded by inadequate orientation to the State Department, both formally, such as through completion of the Ambassadorial Seminar, and more general

immersion in the culture, norms, and expectations associated with leading the career staff. Importantly, while many participants criticized these efforts as insufficient, they also pointed out that these are organizational elements most under the Department leaders' direct control and, therefore, all the more frustrating in their deficiencies.

The implications of successive waves of appointees underprepared and underqualified to serve effectively as in leadership roles can be seen in how careerists viewed those appointees' attitudes towards *them*. While some participants highlighted appointees they have encountered who did not fit the "usual" profile, most descriptions of appointee-career relations emphasized the lack of understanding, or respect for, the composition, expertise, and life impacts of service at State on career officers. They pointed to a "do it my way" mentality that fails to recognize an appointee's own knowledge limitations, leading to an unwillingness to seek or value input from career staff. Several participants stated that the "pre-determined" mistrust of careerist motives towards appointees had been growing in recent administrations, along with a frustration with bureaucracy and its often glacially slow processes. Career employees can also become impatient with the "red tape" but generally understand its necessity to increase accountability or transparency for the public they serve. Many appointees, on the other hand, especially the "beneficiaries," seem to equate a careerist's "measured approach" with reluctance or even insubordination, which only reinforces their preexisting mistrust of career employees' intentions. Finally, even those among the in-and-outers who may value and welcome career staff contributions sometimes do not realize or appreciate how State employees – especially the FSOs – can "live" their careers in ways other federal agency employees do not. FSOs also do not receive the same level of support at overseas

posts as ambassadors, whose residences come with staff and an entire embassy team ready to execute their vision. As a result of these dynamics, most participants said they would prefer to work under a career leader – even if that leader is generally poor at their job – than an appointee, because the career leader "gets it" and "has lived" their experience.

The opinions about appointees at State were not uniformly negative. Participants pointed to some appointees' ability to wield considerable influence in the presidential administration, Congress, the interagency, or the host country. In many cases, well-connected appointees can tap or otherwise marshal resources in ways that most career officers cannot. Appointees can also bring innovative perspectives into the Department, especially those coming from outside the federal government. With those perspectives also comes energy and excitement that can reinvigorate mission action. When these are done in the spirit of performance improvement or a true attempt to understand Departmental processes and actions, they can challenge the *status quo* and/or the assumptions underlying it, thereby leading to real progress. Participants also pointed out that some appointees could be extremely effective at executing policy but, too often, the costs to mission morale, organization attention, and relationships with host-country interlocutors could be devastating. Even in the best-case scenarios of appointees who enter the State Department with deep appreciation for it and its members' work, a willingness to learn how to operate within the system, and personal humility toward the opportunity to represent the people of the United States, their ability to perform effectively is often undercut by their lack of understanding of – and ability to navigate – internal and external dynamics.

Organizational Structure Effects

What these parallels reveal is that assumptions about the attitudes that influence officer behaviors and the negative tenor of their relationship with certain structural elements in the organization may extend well beyond the appointees who benefit from political favors to organizational members at all levels. The parallels also demonstrate that these assumptions – and the attitudes and behaviors to which they contribute – are hurting performance throughout the Department. Far beyond the impact of a single "toxic" ambassador or laser-focused policy wonk, the systems that cycle both leaders and the teams they lead can create an environment in which key components of positive organizational relationships are undermined, including the development of trust in the leader-follower dyad, adequate preparation for assumption of leadership responsibilities, and the ability to access necessary resources to execute the current and future mission of the Department. These organizational structure dynamics fall into three categories: control; politicization; and time-boundedness. While each can pose its own problems for the Department's workforce, together they may severely inhibit its ability to build, sustain, and deploy the professional service necessary to achieve presidential policy priorities in perpetuity.

When asked, the study participants expressed their belief that Departmental leaders have minimal, if any, control over many dynamics that influence its operations, as leaders are appointed by the president, resources are allocated by Congress, and the policy agenda is dominated by the interagency. At the same time, they felt State generally fails to exercise the power it does have over internal structure and operations, as well as exert the external influence that some career officers can develop through their careers.

Career staff felt cut off from many paths to senior leadership positions that provide real opportunities to contribute to the policy process. This last bit seems to have a much stronger negative relationship with career employee attitudes, as participants saw policy process participation as a way to strengthen the outcomes for the United States, not as a path to claiming prestige for themselves. They were frustrated with leadership's ongoing inability to make substantive organizational change so it can better meet the needs and wants of its career workforce, a failure they attributed to multiple factors laid out here: time-bounded assignments; lack of influence; little interest or time for anything beyond the immediate policy agenda; etc. This frustration can increasingly influence career employees' decisions on whether to stay or leave the organization, regrets over career management decisions (i.e., assignment choices), and willingness to trust the organization to protect them and act justly more generally. As a result of these forces, many career employees may shift away from engaging with the mission to a strictly utility/benefits focus. And, while an orientation based on personal benefit is not inherently bad for the organization, that Departmental leaders seem to rely on attitudes like PSM to attract and retain its career workforce instead of reinforcing the benefits that workforce truly values may explain performance declines scholars associate with highly politicized agencies.

The effects of politicization, in the eyes of State's career staff who participated in this study, are generally negative, pervasive, and growing. They perceived a greater willingness by presidents of both parties to use appointees, pointing to the quiet expansion of Seventh Floor appointees under Secretary Blinken despite promises to "rehabilitate" the Department after its experiences during the Trump Administration. The office created for former Secretary of State Kerry's climate initiatives is staffed by

dozens of appointees, few of whom required Senate confirmation. With greater politicization can come vacancies and delays in confirming nominees, a growing dynamic scholars highlight as particularly challenging for federal agencies (Dull et. al, 2012). Study participants described the ripple effects on mission planning, program execution, and questions of legitimacy of authority associated with gaps in leadership, with one participant (FSC21) sharing that the post in which they were currently serving had "no strategy, no social media presence, and no engagement" because, without an ambassador, they had no one to focus the interagency's attention on their country. Their experience encapsulates the sense shared among many participants that State is no longer the "captain of its own fate," and that it must clarify its mission and its place in the foreign policy apparatus or risk becoming irrelevant and, therefore, lose its ability to attract the "best and the brightest" on whom they depend.

The effects of politicization and lack of control at State seem to be exacerbated by the unusual structural element of time-boundedness. While appointees are often time-limited at other federal agencies, it is uncommon for them to lead teams whose members are also rotating, and usually on different schedules. In addition, many of those team members may fill roles whose functions are new to them or for which they have been inadequately prepared due to lack of resources for training and development. As a result, new appointees may have even less time at State than in other agencies to overcome any existing negative beliefs among careerists about their motives, expertise, and openness to their team, all of which can inhibit the development of the trust necessary to legitimate their authority and sustain organizational commitment among the career staff. There is a distinct sense from the words of the career State Department professionals that the

organization in which they serve fails to recognize that the gap between what it offers and what they need it to deliver is growing ever wider, threatening its capacity to meet its mission and bolstering arguments for sidelining the Department in favor of other foreign affairs-relevant agencies. The perpetual use of political appointees contributes both directly and indirectly to this fissure, and presidents who continue to prioritize loyalty and familiarity over critical leadership competencies in appointments at State undermine their own ability to execute their foreign policy agenda.

Summary

The various organizational dynamics described by participants, particularly those associated with leadership within the State Department, suggests that the institutionalization of leader change through the use of political appointments has a negative relationship with Department leaders' ability to build and sustain the workforce it needs to execute the president's foreign policy agenda. These structural elements, in turn, can contribute to perceptions of a lack of control over key functions of the organization exacerbated by both high levels of politicization and time-boundedness of the majority of organizational members. Working within such an organizational ecosystem has led many to conclude that the State Department's leadership is unable to provide an environment that will allow them to develop to their fullest professional potential and engender the sense of safety necessary for true organizational commitment, potentially limiting their willingness to contribute fully towards its mission and goals.

The attitudes and assumptions expressed by the participants of this study demonstrate several phenomena present in the relevant scholarly literature on leadership, trust, and workplace attitudes while offering a potential window into a well-documented

but less understood relationship between politicization and organizational performance. Divergences between expectations and lived reality among career Department employees connect with a range of beliefs about the organization, its role, and its leadership. At the same time, unrecognized parallels existing between career employees and appointees suggest that their assumptions about motivations and other behavioral drivers may not be as different as some career employees believe. That alignment notwithstanding, the challenges to organizational dynamics connected with the appointment system appear to be pervasive and growing, at least in the eyes of the career employees themselves.

In response to these experiences, many career State Department officers may shift their focus from mission to personal benefit in making decisions of whether to stay or leave. Those benefits can take many forms, including the satisfaction they derive from their role as well as the perquisites associated with federal service, and may often provide sufficient incentive for a career employee to remain with the Department until retirement. However, two potential problems may arise from this instrumentality. First, if the State Department's leadership is unable to provide those benefits sufficiently, employees with a primarily instrumental outlook may lead them to separate from the organization prematurely. Second, broader changes in organizational expectations among potential employees in younger generations could result in fewer choosing to pursue a career with the State Department altogether. Neither scenario bodes well for an organization that has historically struggled with widespread, sustainable organizational change.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This study explores the potential connection between structural elements in an organization and the attitudes of that organization's workforce towards their work, their collective mission, and their individual relationships with the organization itself. Specifically, it examines the use of political appointments to fill leadership positions in the U.S. Department of State and how working under a system of constant leadership change can contribute to career employees' beliefs and experience. Drawing from a series of semi-structured interviews with current and former career members of the State Department, the study participants describe a range of motivations, opinions, and responses to organizational dynamics that demonstrate both direct and indirect connections with politicization through appointments. Critically, their stories offer nuance and context to their experiences, yielding a much richer representation of the tensions existing between appointees and careerists in this specific agency. Through an iterative thematic analysis, a picture emerges of an organization that struggles with key functions due to the limitations of time, trust, and attention that heavy reliance on appointments introduces into it. And, while politicization through appointments is not a new dynamic at the State Department, a palpable sense that its adverse effects are increasing arose in several interviews, as is the inclination among participants towards a decidedly instrumental view of their relationship with the Department itself, which predicates their continuing service on its ability to meet their needs, something many said it already struggles to do effectively.

Leadership and its influence on the organization is the lens through which three related research questions are examined. The first asks how presidential use of political

appointments may contribute to career civil servants' workplace attitudes. Importantly, this question does not address the impact of a particular appointee; rather, it probes the aggregation of working within a system that routinely places organizational outsiders into positions of significant responsibility and leadership. From the responses of the participants, both direct and indirect outcomes emerge that are consistently negative. That perception leads directly to the second research question, which questions whether negative relationships with workplace attitudes, such as engagement or job satisfaction, extend to *individual* employee performance. In other words, how broad or deep is the scope of any negative consequences associated with appointees? In terms of direct connections, this can vary depending on several factors, including the seniority of the career employee, their particular job function now or previously, and the capabilities of specific appointees under whom they serve. However, the *indirect* phenomena associated with the systematic use of outside appointees are wider and more pervasive, as successive cohorts of short-term appointees focused solely on policy agenda achievement have failed to address organizational challenges that inhibit its ability to meet the needs of its career workforce amid a rapidly changing environment.

Listening to the voices of the career State employees participating in this study reveals that these direct and indirect outcomes, particularly the leadership problems they may foster, are connected their attitudes in ways that can affect their performance negatively. While participants did not describe shirking or avoidance behaviors, low levels of commitment to the organization and trust in leaders was frequently linked with their interactions with, and perceptions of, appointees. As a result, many now embrace a decidedly instrumental approach to their relationship with the State Department: they

remain career employees only as long as they receive benefits they value. While there is nothing inherently negative about such instrumentality, its basis for continuing membership in the organizations conflicts with the presumed ethos of the State Department steeped in the normative expectations of public service and subsuming one's own needs for the "good of the Department." Adding to this challenge is a shared view that the Department's leaders and managers often fail to provide for the needs of career staff, particularly in the areas of leadership development, career management, and logistical support for the constant job rotations and international moves required of its foreign service personnel. Those failures are tangible examples of the organizational care that participants said is undermined by appointees too focused on execution of specific presidential policy priorities.

Establishing a negative relationship between appointments and individual employee performance, therefore, appears to depend on one's perspective. While there does not seem to be a direct causal relationship between the two, the decline of organizational commitment expressed by many of the study participants suggests there is a connection. In some cases, the linkage was clearer, with participants describing avoiding certain types of assignments or even "hiding out" in roles to avoid interacting with appointees. Other participants spoke of their ongoing disappointment between what they expected from Department leadership and what they actually experienced, and how the divergence between the two is connected with their beliefs about the value of their contributions to the organization. Turning to the final research question, which asks if individual performance declines help explain the negative relationship multiple scholars document between political appointments and federal agency performance, there is a

similar challenge for drawing overt connections between the two. However, many of the concerns over leadership raised by participants during the study could be traced to tensions due to successive presidents' heavy reliance on outsiders in senior leadership at the State Department.

It is reasonable to conclude that an organization in which much of the workforce believes its leadership – regardless of administration or party – has neither the time nor the inclination to attend to their professional needs would underperform peers in agencies where this support is prioritized. The review of the pertinent scholarly literature in Chapter 2 highlights three different types of workforce attitudes: organization-based; role-based; and individual-based. While each of these depend on certain innate beliefs or characteristics for individual employees, each is also subject to potentially significant influence by organizational leaders. This is particularly evident in the organization-based attitude of engagement, which scholars repeatedly connect with decisions about turnover, discretionary effort expenditure, organizational citizenship, and overall performance. Engagement describes an employee's relationship with the entire organization, predicated on the trust the employee places in the leaders as representatives of the organization. The structure of outside appointments can inhibit development of trust, particularly in an organization to places so much emphasis on informal socialization into its tradition and culture like the State Department. Critically, trust in the leader – and, by extension, the organization – depends on the perceptions by members of leaders' capabilities, motives, integrity, and alignment with organizational norms and values. Outsiders with minimal foreign policy or government experience who arrive with a set agenda, display disdain for

career experience and expertise, and expect public officials to respond like their private-sector subordinates clash with every antecedent of trust scholars identify.

Examining the potential relationships between appointments, attitudes, and behaviors effectively necessitated a qualitative approach centered in an interpretivist philosophy. This method interprets context and subjective meanings to gain understanding of the interpersonal dynamics and behaviors at the heart of this study. The subjectivity of both recognizing, describing, and understanding these dynamics by the participants themselves suggests individualization of the effects of the phenomena of interest. Generalizability is not the goal of this study; eliciting and listening to the voices of individuals through semi-structured interviews and employing an iterative approach to their coding and analysis opened a wider window into the assumptions, experiences, and conclusions expressed by the participants. Undertaking a reflexive thematic analysis approach accounted for my personal knowledge and connection to the subject matter, using that familiarity to deepen the analysis and probe beyond participant observations to their motives, beliefs, and presumptions.

The data resulting from 42 one-on-one interviews, all but a few of which were conducted face-to-face, tells the stories of the individual participants and offers clues to their more collective experiences, thereby leading to three key conclusions about the effects of appointments at State. As detailed in the discussion in Chapter 6, the study responses reveal several mismatches between career expectations and reality, between presumed motives or attitudes and observed behaviors, and between what constitutes "good" leadership for career members and appointees. All three of these are underpinned by concerns over leadership quality and development of leadership capabilities among

both the career and appointee workforces. These failings and the perceived lack of importance of leader quality led many to believe that the Department's leaders do not care about them, that they must "look out for themselves," and that mediocre leadership is "good enough" for the career workforce. As a result, organizational commitment, team cohesion, and appointee-careerist relationships all suffer.

Another outcome of these beliefs is an increasingly instrumental orientation towards the Department and career employees' place within it. Surprisingly, most of the study participants gave decidedly instrumental reasons for joining the Department in the first place, eschewing public service motivations for the opportunity to live and work overseas. Over time, many of them reported increasing levels of mission buy-in as important reasons for remaining in the Department long-term. However, frustrations with leadership and organizational operations resulted in most shifting back to instrumental concerns that prioritize benefits over any intrinsic value they derive from their work or association with the State Department. Here, again, is a mismatch that seems to create problems for the Department's leaders, who seemingly cling to its traditional public service ethos to attract and retain the best and the brightest while its workforce seeks more tangible evidence of their value to their organization.

Interestingly, several unacknowledged parallels arose between the attitudes and behaviors of some careerists, especially those in the Foreign Service, and appointees. They rejected the instrumentality that led many to join of them the Department as possible motivations for appointees of whom they approve, like the "in-and-outers," assuming that *they* return to the Department out of a sincere desire to serve or form of public service motivation unlike the "one-and-done" appointees like political donors who

are in it for the prestige, power, or opportunity to parlay it into another government role. In this and other examples of mismatch, the key dynamic is the reliance on presumptions about attitudes or motives and how those presumptions can influence interpretations of observable behaviors. This is a significant challenge the organizational literature highlights in differentiating between various workplace attitudes, which attempts to answer the question of *why* a behavior occurs and assign meaning to what is viewed by others. These parallels and mismatches suggest that overreliance on assumptions on both sides of the appointee and careerist dyad poses real barriers to development of trust and effective working relationships.

Throughout the interviews and this analysis, the recurring theme of the impact of leadership demonstrates the importance of the research questions in the public-sector organizational context. The quality of leadership a career employee experiences, the conclusions they draw from the organization's approach to leadership, and the beliefs they develop about the organization's commitment to them all contribute to their attitudes towards their work. At the State Department, the heavy use of appointees drawn from outside the organization and subject to preset limits on their time in office seems to have created an environment in which career employees lack confidence that their leaders can provide the support and development necessary to maximize their contributions towards the Department's mission and goals. While each career employee must decide whether that is a tenable situation in which to work, the aggregate outcomes may undermine organizational performance and prevent leadership from building and retaining a career workforce capable of meeting the complex challenges of today's U.S. foreign policy agenda.

There are several limitations posed by the design and analytical choices of this study, the first of which are the effects on generalizability due to the selection of the State Department as the agency of interest. However, generalizability was not the goal, as reflected in my decision to employ an iterative, reflexive thematic analysis approach. This study sought only to explore potential connections between the use of appointments and career employee attitudes. Some of the dynamics uncovered during the study are likely attributable to particular elements of the State Department, such as the heightening effect of *both* appointees and foreign service officers working under time limits, which is not a common feature in other federal agencies. There are also likely to be other, unidentified factors influencing the attitudes of some study participants of which even they may not be aware. While thematic analysis enabled me to discern some of the dynamics influencing how participants expressed themselves and what they chose to reveal, my interpretation of their intentions may not fully represent their attitudes or beliefs. The choice to frame the interviews through the leadership lens, and particularly the progression from motives to leadership preferences to experiences before raising appointees explicitly, may have overlooked opportunities to probe deeper about appointments or appointees more generally. The commonalities among many of the interview responses, however, suggests that they provide data that addresses the research questions at the heart of this study.

The ultimate composition of the study population also presents another limitation to the generalizability of its findings even within the agency itself, as less than ten percent (4 of 42) of the participants were current or former members of the civil service within the Department of State. Their shared experiences pose interesting counterpoints to those

from many of their foreign service peers, with more uniformly positive opinions about working under political appointees and less experience working within the "constant churn" organizational model that many foreign service officers experience throughout their careers. Many of the themes and patterns identified during this analysis seem to apply most directly to overseas roles, which are almost exclusively filled by career FSOs, which raises important considerations in how to address their concerns without exacerbating the perception of favoritism for the foreign service expressed by the civil service study participants. It could be enlightening to explore this dynamic in other federal agencies that also house members of excepted services, especially those that also routinely post some of those employees to the overseas missions headed by political appointee ambassadors, such as the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Justice, Defense, and the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Another limitation also proposes a potential next step. As discussed in the literature review, several scholars have called for changes to how politicization is conceived and measured (Limbocker et al., 2022). The most common method of gauging the "level" of politicization – calculating the ratio of appointees to senior positions – highlights the very dynamic I explored in this study in that it ignores the potential correlation (and even the very existence) with the remainder of an agency's workforce. Ratios also fail to capture the effects of appointed positions being filled with highly partisan outsides who can bring greater controversy or scrutiny to an agency through their public statements and actions. If we accept Wood and Lewis's (2107) conceptualization of politicization as the introduction of politics into neutral administration, a simple ratio is too narrow to capture the full effects of politicization through appointments, much less

politicization more generally. As this study demonstrates, there can be both immediate and aggregate outcomes associated with relying on a rotating cast of outsiders and non-career officials to lead public agencies, and I join scholars' call for better methods of conceptualizing and measuring a construct that continues to grow in influence.

On a final note, while most of the study participants described their approach to the State Department in instrumental terms to varying degrees, all of them understood and could articulate the value of their own contributions towards its foreign policy mission. While there appears to be a negative relationship between appointments and their workplace attitudes, politicization does not explain all of the challenges they face in executing the president's policy agenda. Participants spoke of the difficulty in convincing their legislative branch peers of the long-term value of the work done within the Department, keeping the attention of the White House in the face of myriad global crises, educating their fellow citizens on the function of the Department, and combatting increasing attacks against civil servants as members of the "deep state." Taken together, these dynamics suggest an agency in a slow-moving crisis: its members continue to execute their roles despite the mounting challenges to identifying, developing, and sustaining the leaders necessary to support the organization in an increasingly complex and unstable global environment. The effects of institutionalized political appointments are felt directly by some and indirectly by all members at State, contributing to the choice by many to embrace a strictly instrumental approach to managing their careers. That the Department's leaders appear not to recognize this and relies instead on the appeal of its foreign policy mission to drive recruitment and retention of its career workforce could undermine its operational abilities if and when it is unable to meet its career members'

needs. Each of these dynamics pose their own barriers to overall performance and can discourage individuals from joining or staying with the agency. Continuing to explore the particular factors influencing State's career workforce will be an important step towards identifying potential paths forward for the nation's oldest federal agency to remain relevant in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

A. Introduction, Consent Script, and Interview Framing (to be read at start of interviews):

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. This research explores the relationship between appointments and career employee attitudes about work. This includes what motivates you; how you feel about your current role, colleagues, and supervisor; and your thoughts about the State Department, its mission, its values, and its leaders. During this interview, I will ask questions about your time as an employee of the State Department and your perspectives about different aspects of how the Department operates. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can decide not to answer specific questions, or even end the interview, at any time.

This research will not benefit you directly, but it may help the academic community better understand how appointments can affect federal workers. It has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the researchers
- You cannot reach the researchers
- You want to talk to someone besides the researchers to provide feedback about this research

Your participation in this project is confidential; your identity or personal information will not be disclosed in any publication that may result from the study. Notes that are taken during the interview will be stored in a secure location, and any reference to a comment you make will not include any identifying information, including your name; the name(s) of anyone you reference; the office, bureau, or post referenced; or any specific circumstances that could suggest the source of the reference.

Would it be all right if I record our interview? Saying no to recording will have no effect on the interview. Do you have any questions? Do you consent to this interview?

B. Individual Interviews

1. Career expectations
    a. What led you to pursue a career with the State Department?
        i. Do you still feel that way or draw the same inspiration in your work today?
        ii. IF not, what has changed? Is that change for the better or worse?
    b. When you joined the Department, what did you expect to be a realistic career trajectory for yourself?
        i. Does that expectation hold today? Why or why not?
2. Please describe your career with the State Department to-date.
    a. For foreign service:

i. What is your cone?
ii. Has that changed since joining the FS?
iii. Where have you served and in which assignments?
iv. What is your current assignment?
v. How does your current assignment contribute to the Department's ability to meet its overall mission?

b. For civil service:
i. What is your current role at State?
ii. Has that changed during your time at State?
1. In content/focus
2. In function (e.g., reporting vs. policymaking)

c. IF subject has separated from the Department:
i. When and how did you separate from the Department?
ii. IF *not* planned retirement, what were the factors that contributed to your decision to separate?

3. What dynamics do you believe influence the Department's *overall* ability to achieve its foreign affairs mission (i.e., macro factors)
a. Which of these do you believe the Department and its leaders can *control*?
b. Which of these do you believe the Department and its leaders can *influence*?
4. What traits and behaviors do you look for in a leader?
a. (FS only) Do you make bidding decisions based on who will be your supervisor? DCM? COM?
b. (All) Is there a difference between what you look for in a supervisor vs. a senior-level leader, such as an Assistant Secretary or higher?
5. How do you view <u>current</u> senior leaders' (S, D, D/MR, P, M, other A/S) commitment to the Department? Positively, negatively, mixed, unsure, etc. Why?
a. Have you felt differently in the past? What were those circumstances?
b. How did you act on those opinions?
6. [If not raised in response to previous question] – turning to leadership more generally within the Department…<u>in your experience</u>, what factors (qualifications) make someone successful in a <u>formal</u> leadership role *in the Department*?
a. During your career with State, how would you rate the overall quality of leadership you have experienced? High, low, neutral, etc.
b. Why did you give that rating?
7. Have you worked in a post/bureau/department while it was led by a political appointee? How many times (likely FS only)?
a. How closely did you work with the appointee(s)?
b. How would you describe the appointee(s)' time in their role(s)?
8. If given the choice in your next assignment (FS) or role (CS), would you prefer to work under a political appointee or a career employee? Why?
9. Knowing what you have experienced during your time at State, would you make the same decision to join the Department today? Why?
10. What circumstances would influence your decision to remain with the Department until retirement?
11. Are you interested in/willing to participate in small-group discussions of these dynamics?

Appendix 2: Deductive First-Round Codebook

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Capability	A combination of skills and abilities, either the speaker's own or perception of other's
Commitment	Psychological attachment to the organization and its welfare, either the speaker's own or perception of other's
Communication	Exchange of information and ideas between org members, ability of others (especially leaders) to do so and promote within the org
Control	The ability to influence behaviors within the organization
Credibility	External judgment of legitimacy of attitude or behavior, belief that someone is qualified/able to execute their role
Empowerment	Explicitly allowing others (especially subordinates) to participate in decision-making or higher-level activities
Expectations	Anticipated behaviors and outcomes of org member behaviors or actions
Experience	Exposure to and/or participation in events/circumstances that can inform future behaviors
Expertise	Achieving a pre-defined level of capability/competency, often over time
Goal_Achieve	Deriving personal motivation from achieving defined goals [short-term]
Inclusive	Welcomes input/participation from members with all kinds of differences, experiences, and perspectives
Integrity	Observable member/leader alignment with org norms
Leader_Trust	Follower trust in a leader's alignment with org goals and values (norms), belief a leader will act in best interest of individual or org
Mission_Orient	Deriving personal motivation from working towards a common mission [long-term]
Motives	Attitudes that inspire or propel org member behavior
Neutrality	Objectivity in application of org rules and processes in alignment with organizational norms
Org_Align	Org leaders/members observable sharing of common mission and vision
Org_Justice	Member perception of fairness within the org
Org_Trust	Employee trust in the org's ability to uphold stated goals and values (norms)
Public_Good	A commodity or service provided to all members of society without profit
Relationships	Interpersonal connections between org members or the demonstrated value placed on developing/maintaining them
Respect	Valuing all org members for their abilities, contributions, and membership

Deductive First-Round Codebook, Continued

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Service_Orient	Desire to identify and serve others [generally]
Support	Feeling valued and cared for by the leader and/or org
Time_Bounded	Sense of limits on time available to conduct work
Transparency	Promotes open/honest communication at all org levels, especially regarding inputs/factors in decision-making

Appendix 3: Inductive Subsequent-Round Codebook

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Accountability	A leader's perceived willingness to take responsibility for their own behaviors/attitude, those of the team they lead, and/or the organization as a whole
Adaptability	An individual leader's perceived ability to change own attitudes or behaviors in response to circumstances
Bad_Leader_Response	Description of org member attitudes/behaviors in response to experiencing poor leadership
Collaboration	Openness to and embrace of collaborative efforts, inclusivity
Conal_Change	References to changes in FS generalist specialty ("cone")
Congress	Political appointee engagement, influence, and/or relationship with the federal legislative branch
Decision_Making	Factors contributing to ability to make clear decisions, including leader attitudes and acknowledgement of responsibility to do so
Donkey_Work	Leader willingness to "roll up sleeves" and do the grunt work alongside members
Emotional_Intelligence	An individual leader's ability to relate to others with empathy
Humility	An individual's ability to recognize and willingness to admit to the limitations of their own knowledge, experience, and/or capabilities
Influence_External	An individual leader's ability to influence the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of other members of the organization
Influence_Internal	An individual leader's ability to influence the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of external parties, both individuals and collectives
Innovation	Openness of org leadership (generally) towards innovation, entrepreneurial thinking, etc.
Inspiration	The ability of a leader to influence attitudes or action of others towards a common (org) goal
Join_Motive	Description of either (1) why a participant joined the organization OR (2) belief(s) about another member's motives for joining
Lead_vs_Manage	(Perceived) differences between leadership (inspirational, aspirational) vs. management (resource allocation)
Leader_Development	Generalized org commitment of resources (time, money, etc.) to developing leadership capabilities and attitudes of leaders promoting that commitment
Leadership_Quality	Description of overall leadership experienced pr observed while a member of the organization
Org_Knowledge	Understanding of the organization and its daily functioning, including effects on members
Politicization	Attribution of politics or political influences in organizational decision-making
Priorities	References to prioritization of organizational dynamics by internal leaders and/or external stakeholders (e.g., president, Congress, etc.)
Resources	Political appointee's ability to marshal resources for the organization

Inductive Subsequent-Round Codebook, Continued

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Responsibility	An individual leader's willingness to assume responsibility for the team's performance
Risk_Aversion	Both personal inclination and cultural expectation/reward of risk aversion
Secretary_Powell	References to Secretary of State Colin Powell as the archetypal leader of State

Appendix 4: Thematic Groups with Associated Codes

THEME	COUNT	DESCRIPTION
Behaviors		**Outwardly detected/perceived by org members**
Collaboration	7	Openness to and embrace of collaborative efforts, inclusivity
Communication	27	Exchange of information and ideas between org members
Conal_Change	9	References to changes in FS generalist specialty ("cone")
Control	24	The ability to influence behaviors within the org
Decision_Making	32	Factors contributing to ability to make clear decisions, including leader attitudes and acknowledgement of responsibility to do so
Donkey_Work	5	Leader willingness to "roll up sleeves" and do the grunt work alongside members
Empowerment	30	Participation in (or ability to participate in) decision-making
Expectations	93	Anticipated behaviors and outcomes of org member action
Inspiration	20	The ability of a leader to influence attitudes or action of others towards a common (org) goal
Lead_vs_Manage	18	(Perceived) differences between leadership (inspirational, aspirational) vs. management (resource allocation)
Leadership_Quality	151	Description of overall leadership experienced in org
Motives	82	Attitudes that propel org member behavior
Priorities	34	References to prioritization of organizational dynamics by internal leaders and/or external stakeholders (e.g., president, Congress, etc.)
Relationships	29	Interpersonal connections between org members
Risk_Aversion	19	Both personal inclination and cultural expectation/reward of risk aversion
Org Attitudes		**Attitudes centered around organizational dynamics and relationships**
Bad_Leader_Response	43	Description of org member attitudes/behaviors in response to experiencing poor leadership
Commitment	76	Psychological attachment to the org
Credibility	72	External judgment of legitimacy of attitude or behavior
Goal_Achieve	33	Deriving personal motivation from achieving defined goals [short-term]
Innovation	10	Openness of org leadership (generally) towards innovation, entrepreneurial thinking, etc.

Thematic Groups, Continued

THEME	COUNT	DESCRIPTION
Join_Motive	63	Description of either (1) why a participant joined the organization OR (2) belief(s) about another member's motives for joining
Leader_Development	46	Generalized org commitment of resources (time, money, etc.) to developing leadership capabilities
Leader_Trust	46	Follower trust in a leader's alignment with org goals and values (norms)
Mission_Orient	48	Deriving personal motivation from working towards a common mission [long-term]
Org_Align	39	Org leaders/members observable sharing of common mission and vision
Org_Justice	4	Member perception of fairness within the org
Org_Knowledge	81	Understanding of the organization and its daily functioning, including effects on members
Org_Trust	13	Employee trust in the org's ability to uphold stated goals and values (norms)
Public_Good	14	A commodity or service provided to all members of society without profit
Service_Orient	18	Desire to identify and serve others [generally]
Political Attributes		**Descriptions of facets of political appointees**
Congress	24	Political appointee engagement, influence, and/or relationship with the federal legislative branch
Politicization	26	Attribution of politics or political influences in organizational decision-making
Resources	37	Political appointee's ability to marshal resources for the organization
Secretary_Powell	17	References to Secretary of State Colin Powell as an archetypal leader
Time_Bounded	15	Sense of limits on time available to conduct work
Leader Traits		**Internal capabilities, beliefs, attitudes, etc. that may or may not be outwardly detectable**
Accountability	31	The extent to which a leader holds themselves accountability for team performance outcomes
Adaptability	13	An individual leader's perceived ability to change attitudes or behaviors in response to circumstances
Capability	85	A combination of skills and abilities
Emotional_Intelligence	44	An individual leader's ability to relate to others with empathy
Experience	34	Capability achieved over time
Expertise	34	Achieving a pre-defined level of capability/competency

Thematic Groups, Continued

THEME	COUNT	DESCRIPTION
Humility	25	The willingness to a leader to admit their need to learn and admit they don't "know it all"
Inclusive	21	Welcomes members with all kinds of differences
Influence_External	43	An individual leader's ability to influence the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of other members of the organization
Influence_Internal	26	An individual leader's ability to influence the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of external parties, both individuals and collectives
Integrity	29	Observable member/leader alignment with org norms
Neutrality	0	Objectivity in application of org rules and processes
Respect	59	Valuing all org members for their abilities, contributions, and membership
Responsibility	15	An individual leader's willingness to assume responsibility for the team's performance
Support	56	Feeling valued and cared for by the leader and/or org
Transparency	24	Promotes open/honest communication at all org levels

Appendix 5: IRB Approval Letter

Division of Scholarly Integrity and Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 3, 2023

TO: Matthew Martin Dull, Charity L Boyette

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Examining the Effects of Political Appointments on Public-Sector Employee Workplace Attitudes

IRB NUMBER: **23-135**

Effective March 3, 2023, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category (ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As:	**Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date:	**March 3, 2023**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.