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### 1AC---Administration ADV

#### The advantage is ADMINISTRATION.

#### Federal CBRs (or collective bargaining rights) are being stripped, BUT the process is creating mass uncertainty.

Shaun Southworth 1-14, JD, Chief Executive Officer, Southworth PC, "Can Executive Orders Erase Federal Union Rights?" The Mindful Federal Employee, 01/14/2026, https://www.themindfederalemployee.com/blog/can-executive-orders-erase-federal-union-rights.

Federal employees are once again caught in the middle of a high-stakes legal fight over collective bargaining—and this one reaches far beyond any single agency or union. This week, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) returned to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, asking judges to reinstate an injunction that had blocked executive orders aimed at stripping collective bargaining rights from large segments of the federal workforce.

Understanding where things stand now helps reduce some of the anxiety caused by constant legal whiplash. A federal district court initially blocked the executive orders, preventing agencies from enforcing them. The Ninth Circuit later paused that injunction while it considers the appeal. Translation: the court has not ruled on the merits yet, but the practical reality for federal employees is uncertainty. Agencies are watching closely, unions are on alert, and employees are left wondering what protections may still exist tomorrow.

Why “National Security” Is the Government’s Core Argument

The administration’s legal defense centers on national security. Federal labor law does allow a president to exclude certain agencies—or parts of agencies—from collective bargaining if their primary function involves national security or intelligence work. That carve-out is real, and courts have recognized it for decades.

The unresolved question is scope. How far can that exception stretch before it swallows the rule? National security has historically applied to narrowly defined components with clear intelligence or defense missions. What is being tested now is whether that label can be used to justify sweeping exclusions across broad parts of the civil service.

Retaliation vs. Legitimate Authority

Unions argue this case is not really about security at all. Their position is that the executive orders were retaliatory—punishment for unions speaking out, filing lawsuits, or challenging administration policies. That distinction matters legally.

If the same exclusions would have occurred regardless of union activity, courts are more likely to defer to presidential authority. But if the real motivation was silencing organized opposition, that raises serious First Amendment concerns. Courts are often skeptical when “national security” appears to be a post-hoc justification rather than the genuine driver of policy.

What Federal Employees Are Already Experiencing

For many employees, this dispute is no longer theoretical. Some agencies are already experimenting with reduced bargaining, faster implementation of workplace changes, and more “take it or leave it” directives. Others have seen delays in grievance processing or less visible union representation as everyone waits for legal clarity.

From a mindful perspective, uncertainty is often more destabilizing than bad news. The most grounded response is awareness without panic: track what is changing in the workplace, document deviations from established procedures, and understand which protections still exist under statute regardless of executive orders.

What’s at Stake If Bargaining Rights Vanish

Collective bargaining is not an abstract concept. It affects day-to-day protections: representation during discipline, enforceable grievance procedures, and negotiated working conditions. If those disappear, individual employees are left to navigate complex systems alone—often while under stress or facing adverse action.

#### Both confusion AND actual loss wreck effective governance. Eliminating CBRs is the ‘fork in the road directive’ of all civil service policies.

Dr. Joseph McCartin et al. 25, PhD, Professor, History, Georgetown University; Nikki Gamer, Director, Communications & Outreach, American Foreign Service Association. Executive Director, Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor & the Working Poor, Georgetown University; Sharon Papp, JD, General Counsel, American Foreign Service Association; Thomas Dargan, JD, Junior Deputy General Counsel, American Federation of Government Employees, "Service Disrupted: The War on Federal Labor Unions," American Foreign Service Association, transcribed by Otter.ai, 18:32-32:50, 11/20/2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la\_xAzMbveM. [intials inserted for clarity; error edited by Jordan]

JM: That's exactly how it's supposed to work. And I'm reminded listening to both of them of the language that framed John F Kennedy's executive order and what he intended to have come from recognizing federal unions and giving them, you know, an ability to bring federal workers voices into agency policies. This is let me just if I could just read a couple of lines from that just so we are reminded of that vision, that the order began, whereas participation of employees in the formation and implementation of personnel policies affecting them contributes to effective conduct of public business, and whereas the efficient administration of the government and the well being of employees require that orderly and constructive relationships be maintained between employee organizations and management officials, and whereas, subject to to law and the paramount requirements of public service, employee management relations within the federal service should be improved by providing employees an opportunity for greater participation in the formation and implementation of policies and procedures affecting the conditions of their employment. And that's how the Kennedy order began. The order was about recognizing. When you give workers a voice and their agencies in a formal way to express that voice, it's going to make things work better. It's going to make government more responsive to the people. It's going to make the democracy work more effectively. And I think the great tragedy of what we're what we're currently witnessing, is a tremendous rollback of that which is, you know, a threat to the very function of government itself. There was a reason why these reforms were implemented in the first place. They made government work more effectively. They made all agencies work more effectively. And now we're seeing a complete trashing of a system that we should recognize was built in a bipartisan basis, Kennedy's order, followed by Nixon's order, followed by, you know, federal legislation that was bipartisan in its construction. There was a great belief that recognizing worker voice would make government work. Well, it worked. And, you know, the system was put to the test in various ways over time. In the 1990s the Clinton administration recognized the need to sort of reorganize government, and they had a reinventing government initiative. They worked very closely with unions in advancing that during the great recession our you know, our government was faced with lots of challenges, and again, the existence of labor management partnerships in the federal government really helped get us through that. So we're witnessing a real tragic trashing of a very important, vitally important for our democracy system that was constructed on a bipartisan basis.

NG: Yes, bipartisanship, I think that is a word that is really important to this discussion, because unions, you think, oh, real lefties, right? You know it's, it's a cause of the left when, in fact, it lifts. It's, it's been historically bipartisan, as you said, Thomas, I want to move to you. When did you when did afke start realizing that the ground was shifting under it this year, like take us through the first couple months for for your union as they as you faced executive order, or explain the march executive order?

TD: Even Sure. So just by contrast in the first Trump administration, things were relatively status quo for labor relations until about halfway through that term. So middle of 2018 is when the ground started to shift on labor relations and the federal government. By contrast, here it was almost immediately. So everyone here will remember something called the Department of government efficiency that got stood up immediately and started implementing significant reforms and agencies and departments across the federal government, cutting staff, cutting services, canceling contracts that has impacts on the working conditions of our members, and also the American public who rely on the services that our members provide. So from the beginning, really, January 20. Not not exaggerating here, the changes started to take shape. Soon after that, we had probationary terminations on mass and the federal government, starting in early February, AFG has been pretty busy in the courts, filing lawsuits over these things, and we've been partnering with AFSA and many of them and other unions. It's really a team effort here, but we saw 10s of 1000s of federal employees be summarily fired, being told that their employment was no longer in the public interest. Really horrible. People had exceptional performance reviews, and simply because they took a new job in the last year, their trial period started over, and they were let go without any notice. That was in February. We also had massive RIF plans announced in March. So at VA, for example, they wanted to cut the agency from 400,000 to 300,000 the VA is the nation's largest healthcare system, so eliminating 25% of the workforce is obviously going to have a huge impact on the delivery of healthcare and services to veterans. We fought back and filed lawsuits there and then, as you mentioned, Nikki, there was a big executive order on March 27 that changed collective bargaining as we know it, that impacted us many other unions across the civil and Foreign Service, and what it did was invoke an exception in the statute that provides for collective bargaining in the federal government. It's been used historically. Quite narrowly for national security purposes. So if there is a subdivision of a particular agency engaged in national security work or intelligence as a primary function, and collective bargaining cannot be applied to that subdivision or that agency consistent with national security considerations, they can be removed from coverage under the statute, meaning they can no longer engage in collective bargaining. In the past, that's been used for, you know, small military installations or some post 911, agencies, also the Secret Service, the CIA, it's never been used to refuse VA housekeepers from engaging in collective bargaining, or social workers or certainly Foreign Service officers. We're talking about people who are greeting you when you walk into a social security office or a VA hospital. They're not engaged in sensitive national security work, yet the administration used that exception to remove them from the coverage of collective bargaining and the ability to get help from their labor union with issues about pay and discipline investigations, retirement leave spent a lot going on this year. People have questions, right? What is the fork in the road directive. Mean I got this email that my probation is being extended. So by undercutting the unions that represent employees, it's really wreaked havoc on the work lives of those individuals, and since then, it's been really chaotic. I'll be honest with you, the shutdown just ended for now, but there were a ton of rifts that happened during the shutdown. AFGE filed a lawsuit over that, and we've just been hard at work trying to fight back where we can in the courts over these executive orders, getting injunctions where we can pushing these cases as quickly and as far as we can. But there's not a legal solution to every problem, and so that's why it's really important that we come together, work with other stakeholders, people on Capitol Hill, as you mentioned, there's some legislation pushing through Congress. So it's really, you know, an all out effort to do what we can to protect the civil and Foreign Service as we know it.

NG: That was really, that was a good summary. I mean, I can't I just it's even thinking back to February and March. So much has happened, and you mentioned a lot of it. Sharon, I want to go to you. You know, AFSA also had its collective bargaining rights stripped by that March executive order that Thomas mentioned, what did that do? Like in practice? How did, how did that affect our membership?

SP: Okay, before we go there, I just wanted to point out one thing. AFSA was very lucky during Trump one because those executive orders that were taking away official time and office space, they only cited Title Five of the US Code, which covers the civil service. AFSA is under Title 22 of the US Code, so they didn't apply to us. And I think that's why, in the My before times were started with Trump too, because those executive orders didn't apply to us, but we were not so lucky this time, and they definitely cited title 22 and as a result, we were immediately kicked out of our office space. We were told our collective bargaining agreement at the State Department and aid were terminated dues deductions, automatic dues deductions. You know, employees voluntarily sign up to pay union dues. Those were all stopped. The biggest thing is losing the right to engage in collective bargaining, which means that, you know, the agencies can change conditions of employment without notifying the union, without negotiating with the union, and really we have no authority under the statute to stop that or protest it. And I think one of the worst things that happened was at the State Department, they decided to change at the last minute, on the eve of the riff, the Foreign Affairs Manual regulations governing the procedures for a RIF and just a red what reduction, I'm sorry, a reduction in every layoff, a layoff, a layoff of employees, and under the old rules, what they do is they under that type of situation, there are procedures that the the aim is to keep people who are the best performers, this is for the Foreign Service who have language capability. And then there's always a requirement for veterans preference and in the Foreign Service, because it's a worldwide service, with people moving every two or three years to a different location. The way they were supposed to compare people was worldwide based upon their grade and what your skill code or cone, which basically means, if you're a political officer, you're competing against political officers. If you're a nurse, you're competing against other nurses. Well, instead of doing it that way worldwide, they made it very, very narrow, so that people were competing in just one office, you know, office by office, by office, instead of worldwide, which made the competition area very, very narrow, which meant, in a lot of cases, there was nobody anybody was competing with. It was just them. You know, they were the only person identified, because there's no one in that competition group. And by doing that, I think we figured out about 60 to 65% of the Foreign Service employees who were rift at the State Department were in a competition group of one themselves. And by doing that, you're not taking into consideration what the Foreign Service Act says you should be, which is performance and language capabilities and veterans preference. And so that was very damaging, very unfair. But because we're not a union, we're not recognized as a union because of this executive order, we've filed unfair labor practices, we filed grievances. But what's happening? They're all being put on hold because of this executive order and ongoing litigation challenging this executive order. So it's been very damaging, as Thomas was saying, it's kind of total chaos regarding these RIF notices. The recent continuing resolution has a procedure that paused these RIF notices, and individuals who were scheduled to be Rift have been told, okay, you're back on admin leave, but no further information of how long are they going to be on admin leave. You know, what does this all mean? And it's just total chaos. And Assa has been reaching out to the department, asking for meetings, and it really would be in their interest if they would meet with us and explain things so that we could help explain to our members, okay, this is what it means, and at least to try to stop some of the chaos. Yeah.

#### Governance depends on effectively calibrating incentives and protections for the rank-and-file. Empirics AND consensus of studies confirm it.

Kohei Suzuki 25, PhD, Assistant Professor, Institute of Public Administration, Faculty of Governance & Global Affairs, Leiden University, "Government Efficiency or Administrative Backsliding?: Warning Signs from Global Experience with Administrative Decline," Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration, Vol. 47, No. 2, pg. 91-95, 02/28/2025, T&F.

While such reforms might yield short-term efficiency gains and expenditure cuts, they raise serious concerns about the long-term consequences for bureaucratic autonomy and institutional capacity. The fundamental question is whether these changes will truly create an “efficient government” and “make America great again” or instead undermine the professional foundations of American public administration.

To address this question, we must consider why professional bureaucracies are essential to modern governance. Effective policy implementation requires both political direction and administrative expertise. While elected officials establish broad policy goals, they lack the specialised knowledge needed for the thousands of technical decisions that government operations demand daily. Career civil servants bridge this gap, providing the expertise and continuity necessary for effective public service delivery.

Career civil servants’ expertise becomes evident when we examine the complex tasks of modern governance. Daily operations include activities like collecting pension premiums, analysing economic data, implementing financial regulations, and managing defence procurement. These functions demand not just specialised knowledge but years of practical experience and institutional understanding – qualities that cannot be rapidly replaced or replicated.

The effective functioning of democratic governance thus depends on a careful balance: elected officials provide policy direction while professional bureaucrats handle technical implementation. Critical decisions – from monetary policy to drug safety certification – require deep technical expertise rather than political judgement (Fukuyama, 2024). When politicians overreach into these technical domains, their limited specialised knowledge and focus on short-term political gains often leads to suboptimal or even harmful outcomes.

While the need for professional bureaucracy is universal, countries vary considerably in how they balance political leadership and administrative expertise. A 2020 expert survey by the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, offers valuable insights into these differences, measuring how strongly countries adhere to merit-based principles in their personnel practices (Nistotskaya et al., 2021). Their survey data in Figure 1 reveals significant variation across OECD member and Asian countries and regions, with higher scores indicating stronger merit-based practices and correspondingly lower levels of political intervention in personnel decisions.

Under merit-based systems, civil service appointments primarily depend on educational background and professional experience rather than political connections. Countries like Norway, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, and Japan have developed particularly robust merit-based practices. The American system stands out especially among developed nations for its relatively extensive use of political appointments higher degrees of political interference in personnel matters. The contrast becomes stark when comparing specific numbers: while Japan maintains only about 80 political appointments in its entire civil service, the United States replaces approximately 4,000 high-ranking positions through political appointments during administrative transitions (Kobayashi, 2024). Such high degree of political influence in personnel matters has long distinguished the U.S. federal bureaucracy from its counterparts in other advanced democracies.

The extensive use of political appointments in the U.S. federal bureaucracy reflects a broader phenomenon that public administration scholars term “politicisation” - the practice of basing civil service personnel decisions on political criteria such as party relationships, personal connections, or ideological alignment rather than merit criteria (Peters & Pierre, 2004). The current reforms under the second Trump administration would significantly expand this already distinctive feature of American public administration.

The consequences of such politicisation have been extensively studied. A robust body of research, drawing from diverse national contexts including both developed and developing countries, demonstrates that increasing political control over bureaucracy tends to undermine, rather than enhance, government performance. Empirical studies around the world have found strong correlations between excessive politicisation and increased corruption, decreased organisational performance, and reduced operational efficiency (Cornell, 2014; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Lapuente & Suzuki, 2020; Lewis, 2011; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016). In fact, our recent systematic review of over 1,000 peer-reviewed papers provides compelling evidence that merit-based systems yield significantly better outcomes than politicised ones, including reduced corruption, improved efficiency, increased public trust, and enhanced civil servant motivation (Oliveira et al., 2024).

#### Administrative failure impedes governance necessary to moderate convergent risks.

Dr. Henry Farrell 25, PhD, Professor, International Affairs, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, "When the Polycrisis Hits the Omnishambles, What Comes Next?" Programmable Mutter, 02/21/2025, https://www.programmablemutter.com/p/when-the-polycrisis-hits-the-omnishambles. [italics in original]

The point of Paul’s post, taken from Marvin Hyman Minsky,\* is that one of the key roles of government is to mitigate the tendencies toward irrationality in financial markets. Risks and higher profits tend to go together, encouraging the participants in financial markets to do ever chancier things with their and their clients’ money. To the extent that these risks are correlated, or actively reinforce each other, there is an ever increasing likelihood that people take too much risk and market goes kaput. Government regulators create rules that dampen this “irrational exuberance” to the immediate annoyance of financial people (who want to make as much money as they can) but to the long term benefit of society, making markets more stable, and crises less common. So what happens when the crypto folks (whose *entire business model* is irrational exuberance and ‘number go up’) get their hands on the levers of government? Nothing good.

My and Abe’s argument also talks a lot about the consequences of crypto - but for economic statecraft. We say that the two-decades-old system of economic coercion, under which specialized technocrats set the pace of economic statecraft - is over. We’ve suggested elsewhere that this system had its own tendencies toward irrational exuberance, underestimating the risks that their actions could have unexpected consequences. But those risks are likely to be much greater in Trump’s second administration, which combines a much bigger appetite for pushing other countries around, with a revealed preference to let Elon Musk and the crypto bros start smashing the government structures that actually allow the U.S. to do this.

That is partly down to Trump’s own peevish unpredictability. Thin skin and thick skull are an unfortunate combination in a leader. It is also down to the various factions in government, which seem united only in their enthusiasm to dismantle the administrative state. In our words, “we may be looking at the beginning of a world in which countries disentangle themselves from U.S. dependence at the same time that our machinery of power begins rusting from within.”

These are loosely similar insights - but they concern different aspects of the U.S. state. So is there some way of bringing them together?

A couple of years ago, on my now deleted Twitter account, I had a brief joking dialogue with Adam Tooze, about the concept of polycrisis, which he didn’t invent but has popularized. Adam explains the polycrisis as a concatenation of big problems - e.g. climate change; the crisis of democracy; global migration - that not only hit simultaneously but plausibly make each other worse. I pointed to another neologism, the “omnishambles” (from Arnaldo Ianucci’s dark comedy, *The Thick of It* - Wikipedia definition), describing governmental situations in which no-one has any idea what is going on or what to do, and policy-making is utterly shambolic and fucked up. By construction, I suggested, there must be such things as the polyshambles and omnicrisis.

It wasn’t a very good joke, but I think that there is a useful intuition behind it, which is worth turning into an entirely unfunny diagnosis. We are in a world where our problems are getting bigger, and are feeding on each other. Those of us who live in the U.S. are at the beginning of a sudden and dramatic worsening of the quality of government policy making. In other words, we are about to see a collision between the polycrisis and the omnishambles. So how do we think about this collision usefully?

From this perspective, both Paul’s post, and our op-ed map specific pieces of a larger and more complex problem. And when I use the term ‘complex,’ I use it advisedly. The polycrisis is a simplified way of talking about the world as a complex system. In Scott Page’s description, a “complex system consists of diverse entities that interact in a network or contact structure.” In less academic language, it is a larger system composed of smaller sub-systems that interact with each other. Even when these sub-systems are relatively simple, the whole may be complex and unpredictable. And when they are themselves complex …

This way of thinking about the world helps clarify what the polycrisis involves. Complex interactions may give rise to positive feedback loops, in which different parts of the system reinforce each other so as to induce instability. To apply this to the polycrisis, think crudely of how climate change may increase the likelihood of large scale migration across borders, leading to crises of democracy and government legitimacy, which in turn makes governments less capable of regulating the economic activities that make climate change worse. But complex systems may also give rise to homeostasis, in which some parts of the system become adaptive, perhaps dampening down positive feedback loops and responding dynamically to unexpected changes in the environment.

One of Paul’s early books builds on these ideas (although he later became skeptical, since they are notably better at describing the phenomenon than predicting how it will unfold, let alone providing precise guidance on what to do about it). Indeed, the Minsky cycle is *exactly* an example of how government may act to limit the likelihood of positive feedback loops getting out of hand. Without regulation, irrational exuberance feeds upon itself and the behaviors it induces. The role of the Federal Reserve, famously, is to order “the punch bowl removed just when the party [is] really warming up.”

Behind Paul’s post - and our piece - lies a possible understanding of the larger situation we face. In good times, we have an environment in which the problems are not too big, or can be dealt with one by one, or, ideally, both things are true at once. We have a government that is capable of dealing with them, acting as a kind of homeostatic regulator, which dampens down the possible chaos without, and perhaps even takes advantage of the unexpected possibilities it provides (while avoiding eviscerating the dynamical aspects of the economy - one can absolutely have too much government).

We are not in those good times. Instead, we are in an increasingly unpredictable environment with multiple major problems reinforcing each other in complex ways (the polycrisis). At much the same time, the most significant government in the world is absolutely not acting as a homeostatic regulator. Instead, of dampening down the chaos, it is accelerating it, while ripping out large swathes of the administrative apparatus that potentially allow it to understand the environment and influence it.

Trump’s second term is going to be the apotheosis of the omnishambles. And it is potentially *even grimmer* than that. In an ideal world, there is at least a second order feedback loop such that bigger problems leads to better government and the expansion of capacity for government to deal with these problems in conjunction with other modes of problem solving (markets; democracy). In the world we are in right now, there seems to be just the opposite set of feedbacks. Bigger problems are not leading to better government in the U.S. and elsewhere, but to worse.

As noted already, complexity theory is much better at describing problems like this than at predicting how they will turn out, let alone solving them. But it at least provides a framework for seeing how the different sub-systems might interact together.

The crises we are likely to face in Trump’s second term are not simply going to be crises of financial regulation, or of tariffs, or of withdrawn security guarantees, or breakdowns of scientific knowledge, or loss of capacity to respond to emergencies. They are likely, instead to involve the interactions of two or more of these factors with each other, and with the pre-existing problems of the polycrisis. Mapping out - even crudely - the relationships between these different sub-systems will help us be better prepared for what happens, even if we cannot fully anticipate it.

It provides a better framework for understanding the true weirdness of the ideas animating the agenda of DOGE and many of the Silicon Valley connected people who are backing Trump. Behind Marc Andreessen’s celebration of ‘effective accelerationism’ with its ‘technocapital singularity’ lies the delirious counter-cybernetics of the neo-reactionary thinker Nick Land, who depicts positive feedback loops as a Lovecraftian dark god to be worshipped and celebrated:

The story goes like this: Earth is captured by a technocapital singularity as renaissance rationalization and oceanic navigation lock into commoditization take-off. Logistically accelerating techno-economic interactivity crumbles social order in auto sophisticating machine runaway. As markets learn to manufacture intelligence, politics modernizes, upgrades paranoia, and tries to get a grip. The body count climbs through a series of globewars. Emergent Planetary Commercium trashes the Holy Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Continental System, the Second and Third Reich, and the Soviet International, cranking-up world disorder through compressing phases. Deregulation and the state arms-race each other into cyberspace. By the time soft-engineering slithers out of its box into yours, human security is lurching into crisis. Cloning, lateral genodata transfer, transversal replication, and cyberotics, flood in amongst a relapse onto bacterial sex. Neo-China arrives from the future. Hypersynthetic drugs click into digital voodoo. Retro-disease. Nanospasm.

Finally, it provides a framework for thinking about what we need to do. In a world of proliferating, intersecting crises that feed upon each other and themselves, building state capacity is crucial. This might, or might not mean more state depending - the more crucial and urgent tasks are twofold. First, to remake the state so that it is more flexible and responsive. Second, to create different feedback loops between the state and democracy than the one we are trapped in right now, in which the bigger the crises get, the more that they empower the people who want to ignore them, rip out the control systems, or, in the extreme, actively welcome the crises in. I’ve written before about the beginnings of alternatives that are at least better aware of the challenges we face, but they’re only the beginnings, and we need a whole lot more.

#### That is existential.

Dr. Huan Liu & Dr. Ortwin Renn 25, PhD, Regents Professor, Computer Science & Engineering, Arizona State University; PhD, Professor, GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences, Former Scientific Director, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, "Polycrisis and Systemic Risk: Assessment, Governance, and Communication," International Journal of Disaster Risk Science, 05/28/2025, Springer. [italics in original]

The last few decades clearly demonstrated that global systems—ranging from finance to national security, to climate change and energy—are highly susceptible to global crises and multiple risks (Renn 2024). As illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s war on Ukraine, geopolitical tensions, and climate change and others, systemic risks do not remain confined to the global systems in which they originate. With the increasing complexity and interactive dynamics of our interconnected world, these crises are not isolated events, but rather intertwined. They can quickly spread across borders and sectors, as well as amplify and cascade the impact of each crisis from one domain to the next (Lawrence et al. 2024a). For example, the global financial crisis of 2008 not only caused widespread economic disruption but also led to severe political instability (Helleiner 2024). The Covid-19 pandemic has not only induced a health crisis but has also led to severe economic downturns, strained international relations, and accelerated environmental degradation due to constrained supply chains, lack of sustainable substitutes for replacing energy imports, and trade restrictions (Alizadeh et al. 2023). Similarly, climate change, which affects multiple systems simultaneously, including ecosystems, economies, and social structures, also acts as a multiplier, exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities and contributing to political instability and conflict (Kahn et al. 2021; Sillmann et al. 2022). Allegedly separate crises in different global systems influence and amplify each other, creating multiple interacting crises that must be comprehended and responded to collectively as a whole (Moure-Peñín 2024).

In light of these new developments, the emphasis of integrated disaster and risk research has shifted from topical analyses to comprehensive analyses of interconnected and mutually interactive risk sources and crises (Renn 2024). Such interactions have often been framed in the language of “polycrisis,” suggesting that each crisis has the potential to expand, amplify, and cascade from one domain to the next (Lawrence 2024b). The notion of a “polycrisis” serves as an insightful approach for comprehending and tackling significant challenges confronting humanity and has gained traction among an increasing number of commentators, agencies, and researchers who seek to capture the intricate interactions between the world’s conjoined crises (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022; Hoyer et al. 2023; Helleiner 2024; Lawrence et al. 2024a; Renn 2024). It has been defined and applied in different disciplines over the past two decades, but there are still some disagreements on the definition of the concept, and deficiencies in common understanding as the discussion about polycrisis is still evolving and new elements and aspects have been suggested to create a more comprehensive and operational definition (ASRA 2024).

At the same time, the literature on systemic risk addresses this situation from the perspective of risk assessment and governance (Lucas et al. 2018a; Renn and Lucas 2022; Renn et al. 2022). The concept of systemic risk includes the need to focus on multiple, interacting risks and analyzes the effects of these risks on the functionality and survivability of entire systems such as climate stability, cybersecurity, or energy production. Understanding and managing multiple crises and systemic risks is critical for developing effective strategies to address the intricacies of contemporary global challenges, especially in times of political fragmentation (World Economic Forum 2023). Moreover, geopolitical fragmentation has been identified as a major cause for promoting geo-economic warfare and increasing risks of multidisciplinary conflicts (World Economic Forum 2023). Thus, the significance of studying multiple crises and systemic risks is further emphasized in an era of political fragmentation, highlighting the need for a systemic perspective that assists risk managers to navigate through the complexities of polycrisis and govern their cascading impacts. The conventional risk management framework is incapable of responding to the increasing systemic and existential risks posed by decades of globalization, digitalization, and political segmentation (Lawrence et al. 2024a; Renn 2024).

This review therefore aimed to provide a comprehensive survey of current state-of-the-art research on both polycrisis and systemic risk, and to delineate the implementations of a joint understanding of polycrisis and systemic risk for risk assessment, risk and crisis governance, and effective communication to different audiences. The article first reviews the definitions and concepts of polycrisis and systemic risk, highlighting the commonalities and differences between them. It then summarizes the methods used to assess and model these risks, reviewing new trends for assessing, managing, and governing systemic risks in a complex world. Based on the insights gained from the current literature, it discusses the deficiencies of existing risk assessment, governance, and communication frameworks in the context of addressing systemic risk in polycrisis, and strategies to address these deficiencies. These strategies focus on enhancing the capacity of governance structures to manage interconnected crises, improving the assessment and modeling of systemic risks, and developing effective governance instruments as well as communication strategies to engage diverse stakeholders and affected citizens. Ultimately, the article suggests some lessons to policymakers and practitioners for building more resilient and adaptive response systems capable of dealing with the complexity of interconnected and contemporary global challenges. By synthesizing insights from the polycrisis and systemic risk research, this review also includes implications for future studies.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces the origin, definition, and concept of polycrisis, followed by Sect. 3, in which we introduce the history and concept of systemic risk, discuss the challenges for risk assessment, governance, and communication, and identify the commonalities and differences between polycrisis and systemic risk. Sections 4, 5, and 6 define the application of a joint understanding of polycrisis and systemic risk to methods of risk assessment, methods of risk management and governance, and types of effective communication to different audiences. In addition, these sections also address the new requirements for coping more adequately than today with systemic risks in situations of polycrisis. Finally, Sect. 7 discusses and summarizes the implications of this review work and delineates directions for future research. Figure 1 presents the overall framework of this review article.

[Figure omitted]

2 Polycrisis: Definitions and Concepts

Recent literature (Lawrence 2023; ASRA 2024; Lawrence et al. 2024a; Lawrence et al. 2024c) has provided a detailed overview of the history and evolution of polycrisis, thus this section only briefly describes the origin of the term “polycrisis” but focuses more on summarizing the various conceptual definitions and proposing a classification for different concepts of polycrisis.

2.1 Origin

The term “polycrisis” was first introduced by complexity theorists Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern in their 1999 book “Homeland Earth” (Lawrence et al. 2024a). They argued that the world does not face a single vital problem but many complex interconnected problems (Morin et al. 1999). Later, South African sociologist and sustainable transformation theorist Mark Swilling adopted this terminology to describe a complex set of globally interactive socioeconomic, ecological, and cultural-institutional crises that cannot be reduced to a single cause. Swilling also emphasized that climate change, growing inequality, and the financial crisis interact in ways that amplify their combined impact (Swilling 2013). Then, former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker used the term “polycrisis” to describe the series of government challenges facing Europe at a time when finance, immigration, and Brexit crises occurred in a 2016 speech, asserting that these crises were not only concurrent but also cascading (Juncker 2016; Ágh 2017; Zeitlin et al. 2019).

More recently, scholars have used the term “polycrisis” to describe the complex interplay between the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s war on Ukraine, and climate change, among other issues (Lavell 2021; Sillmann et al. 2022). Columbia University historian Adam Tooze noted in his book *How Covid Shook the World Economy* that while “polycrisis” effectively captures the simultaneous occurrence of different crises, it does not explain their interactions (Tooze 2021). In a *Financial Times* opinion piece, Tooze further suggested that in multiple crises, different shocks interact, making the overall impact more overwhelming than the sum of individual crises (Tooze 2022).

In parallel, the Cascade Institute launched a research program on global multiple crises. In its 2022 discussion paper, the authors proposed the concept of “global polycrisis” as a framework to investigate the causal connections between crises across global systems, providing a clear definition (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022, p. 2): “A global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected.”

Yet the term “polycrisis” really came into the public eye when it became the main buzzword at the January 2023 annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos (Serhan 2023; Lawrence et al. 2024a). The term was placed prominently throughout the document in their first annual report, emphasizing that: “Concurrent shocks, deeply interconnected risks and eroding resilience are giving rise to the risk of polycrisis—where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part” (World Economic Forum 2023, p. 9).

The various definitions and characterizations of polycrisis are summarized in Table 1. As one can clearly see, the scope of definitions and concepts is still limited, and most definitions show similar patterns and characteristics. The definitions differ in what they emphasize but they are almost identical in identifying the key features of polycrisis.

[Table omitted]

2.2 A Proposal for Classifying Different Concepts of Polycrisis

Based on the literature review (see Table 1), we came up with a list of crucial features that most sources agree are constitutive for polycrisis: (1) the simultaneity of allegedly independent crises; (2) the potential loss or breakdown of system functionality; (3) the likelihood of crises “infecting” other systems; (iv) the likelihood of risk cascading within and between systems; and (5) the likelihood of amplifying impacts. These features highlight the interconnectedness and complexity of polycrisis, leading to cascading failures across systems and amplifying the effects of individual crises (Lawrence, Williams, et al. 2022; UNDP 2022; Lawrence et al. 2024a; Renn 2024).

Given these characteristics, we found it necessary to produce a more generic framework for understanding and addressing polycrisis. This framework can be categorized into four main dimensions: interconnectedness, complexity and uncertainty, temporal and spatial dimensions, and systemic impacts (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022; Tooze 2022; Hoyer et al. 2023; Helleiner 2024; Lawrence et al. 2024a; Renn 2024).

* *Interconnectedness* is a defining feature of polycrisis, where multiple crises are interlinked, and their interactions can amplify the effects of individual crises, leading to cascading failures across systems. This interconnectedness means that a crisis in one domain, for instance economic collapse, can trigger or exacerbate crises in other domains. Understanding these linkages is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate the impact of polycrisis.
* *Complexity and uncertainty* arise from the multiple, intertwined causes and effects that characterize polycrisis. This complexity makes it difficult to predict outcomes and manage the situation effectively. The unpredictable nature of the interactions between different crises adds a layer of uncertainty, complicating efforts to devise coherent responses. Policymakers and stakeholders must navigate this uncertainty by adopting flexible and adaptive approaches that can respond to evolving conditions.
* *Temporal and spatial dimensions* of polycrisis reflect how these crises can span different geographical regions and evolve over time. The impact of a polycrisis can vary significantly across sectors and populations, affecting different regions and communities in diverse ways. Recognizing these temporal and spatial dimensions is essential for tailored interventions that address the specific needs of affected populations.
* *Systemic impacts* underscore the broad reach of polycrisis, which can affect entire systems such as economic, social, environmental, and political systems. Unlike isolated incidents, polycrisis can disrupt the functionality of multiple systems simultaneously, leading to widespread instability, which highlights the need for integrated approaches that consider the systemic nature of polycrisis.

Therefore, developing a comprehensive framework for understanding polycrisis involves recognizing these features and adopting strategies that address the intricate web of interactions between different crises. By focusing on these four dimensions risk analysts are better prepared to provide more accurate and policy-relevant risk assessments and risk managers to develop more effective, efficient, fair, and resilient coping strategies for dealing with polycrisis (Renn 2024). Such holistic approach is crucial for mitigating the cascading failures and amplifying impacts that characterize polycrisis, ultimately leading to more resilient and adaptive systems.

3 Systemic Risks: Definitions and Concepts

To comprehensively compare and contrast polycrisis and systemic risk, this section first introduces the concept of systemic risk and explores how systemic risk is framed and understood in a variety of academic disciplines. It then elaborates on the commonalities and differences between the two concepts, followed by challenges for risk assessment, governance, and communication.

3.1 History of the Concept of Systemic Risk

The concept of systemic risk has evolved significantly over the decades, reflecting its roots in complexity science and network dynamics. Emerging in the 1950s, it initially focused on mathematical equilibrium and agent-based models to understand impacts such as virus transmission and ecological breakdowns. These early models, however, were limited to assessing risk exposure effects rather than predicting or addressing the systemic nature of risk itself (Faulhaber et al. 1990).

The understanding of systemic risk expanded significantly in the early 2000s, driven by the recognition of “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 1973). This period saw an increased focus on how specific events could trigger cascading effects across interconnected systems, leading to widespread losses and potential systemic collapse. The 2007/08 financial crisis and climate-related disasters underscored the importance of these cascading effects, the experience of tipping points in cause-effect relationships, and the relational and procedural aspects of systemic risk (Schweizer 2021; Renn and Lucas 2022; Schweizer et al. 2022).

A major milestone occurred in 2003 when the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) adopted the concept of systemic risks to address threats to essential societal systems like infrastructure, healthcare, and telecommunications. This broadened the concept’s visibility beyond academia into policymaking. Kaufman and Scott (2003) further refined the definition, emphasizing the systemic nature of risk as the probability of breakdowns in an entire system, evidenced by co-movements among its parts. Other authors such as Rodriguez et al. emphasized the systemic relationship between the financial sector and the real-world economy pointing out that allegedly purely financial transactions had systemic impacts on world trade and corporate governance (Rodriguez et al. 2014).

The global financial crisis of the late 2000s, and much later events like the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, clearly demonstrated the real-world manifestations of systemic risks. These crises emphasized the global, catastrophic, and even existential nature of such risks (Helbing 2013; World Economic Forum 2021). De Bandt and Hartmann (2019) characterized systemic risk through the dual components of shocks and propagation mechanisms, highlighting how these elements trigger systemic impacts.

Further refining the concept, Billio et al. (2012) defined systemic risk as circumstances threatening financial system stability and public confidence. Smaga (2014) proposed that systemic risk involves shocks leading to significant imbalances, impairing financial systems and adversely affecting the real economy. The European Central Bank (ECB) (2010) and other scholars have echoed these definitions, focusing on various mechanisms like imbalances, correlated exposures, and feedback behaviors (Caballero 2011; Mishkin 2011; Acharya et al. 2017).

Beyond the financial focus, systemic risk has been recognized as a threat to critical societal systems with impacts extending beyond their origin, as proposed by Renn (2016) and Schweizer and Renn (2019). Other authors studied the connection between physical and political risks (Homer-Dixon et al. 2022; Jerez-Ramíre and Ramos-Torres, 2022). The International Risk Governance Council (IRGC 2018) highlighted the cascading effects that are typical for systemic risks. The extension of systemic risk to include all natural, social, and technological domains led to an inflation of definitions and conceptualizations that emphasize specific features of systemic risks over conventional risks. Table 2 provides an overview of the most popular definitions and characterizations of systemic risks.

[Table omitted]

Based on the intensive discussion on the nature and characteristics of systemic risk, several scholars have suggested core properties of systemic risks, highlighting their complex behaviors (Renn 2016; Lucas et al. 2018a, b; Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022; Renn et al. 2022; Schweizer 2022; Sillmann. et al. 2022). Although terminology may differ, there is consensus that systemic risks possess four key properties (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022; Lawrence et al. 2023):

* Extremely complex and dynamic networks with multiple, synergistic causes and feedback loops.
* Highly nonlinear cause-effect relationships characterized by disproportional causation, with multiple equilibria, unpredictable tipping points, and hysteresis.
* Causal processes that transcend the boundaries of administrative and political units, social sectors, and scientific disciplines, operating on multiple time scales across natural, social, and technological systems.
* Stochastic relationships involving deep uncertainty about both underlying causes and ultimate consequences.

However, there have been also critical reviews of the concept of systemic risks. Getmansky et al. (2015) argued that the current situation in the literature regarding the definition of systemic risk is not satisfactory and lacks precision and clarity.

Overall, the concept of systemic risk has evolved from its initial mathematical models to a comprehensive understanding encompassing financial, ecological, and societal systems, emphasizing the interconnectedness and cascading effects that characterize modern systemic threats.

3.2 Multiple Perspectives from Different Disciplines

Systemic risk is understood and conceptualized differently across various disciplines, each offering unique insights into its nature and implications (Renn et al. 2022). This section aims to provide a coherent and precise overview of how systemic risk is perceived in fields such as economics, social sciences, engineering, ecology, and disaster risk management.

*Economics and Financial Systems*: In economics, particularly within financial systems, systemic risk is primarily associated with financial crises, regulatory measures, and market interdependencies. Early research focused on bank failures and the theoretical underpinnings of bank runs. Diamond and Dybvig (1983) pioneered the formal modeling of liquidity transformation in banks, illustrating how this could lead to bank runs. Subsequent work by Jacklin and Bhattacharya (1988) and Donaldson (1992) expanded on this by exploring panics, interbank trading, and the probability of financial crises. Kaufman and Scott (2003) provided a widely accepted definition of systemic risk in finance, describing it as the risk of breakdowns in an entire system, evidenced by co-movements among its parts. Systemic risk in banking often refers to a macro-shock affecting the entire financial system (Bartholomew and Whalen 1995) or a sudden event disrupting financial markets (Mishkin 1997). It also includes the micro-level transmission of shocks through interconnected institutions (Kaufman 1995) and the risk of cascading failures triggered by participant defaults (Group of Ten 2001).

*Social Sciences*: Social scientists view systemic risk through the lens of social systems and their vulnerabilities, with a primary emphasis on the unintended or unforeseen effects of multiple interactions between individuals, groups, and organizations modified or shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural context conditions (Lucas et al. 2018a, b). Helbing (2013) highlighted the nonlinear interdependencies resulting from human interactions, which can lead to unpredictable outcomes like social unrest and revolutions. Such systemic risks manifest when societal equilibrium is significantly disrupted by radical movements (Schroter et al. 2014).

*Engineering and Technological Systems*: In engineering, systemic risk is often discussed in the context of infrastructure and technological systems, focusing on resilience, safety engineering, and interdependencies. Technological systemic risk involves potential disruptions within systems like cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), and critical infrastructure, leading to widespread and cascading effects (Schweizer and Renn 2019; Liu et al. 2021). These risks can propagate through interconnected digital infrastructures, affecting sectors ranging from national security to personal privacy.

*Ecology and Environmental Sciences*: Environmental scientists link systemic risk to ecological and environmental systems, assessing interactions between human interventions and natural responses. Systemic risk in this context refers to the potential collapse of ecosystems or widespread disruptions with cascading effects on both ecological and socioeconomic systems (Scheffer et al. 2009; Helbing 2013; Lenton 2013). Examples include climate change, biodiversity loss, and industrial pollution, all of which have far-reaching and interconnected impacts.

*Natural Hazards and Disaster Risk Management*: In disaster risk management, systemic risk involves the potential for natural hazards and disasters to cause widespread, cascading effects across interconnected ecological, social, and economic systems (Lade et al. 2020; Mitra and Shaw 2023; Richardson et al. 2023). This type of risk is shaped by the complexity and interdependencies of modern societies, where disruptions in one area can trigger failures in others. Systemic risks related to natural hazards require comprehensive and integrated approaches to risk assessment and management (UNDRR 2021; Sillmann et al. 2022).

By integrating insights from different disciplines, a more comprehensive understanding of systemic risks can be accomplished. Simultaneously, collaborative governance, adaptive strategies, and holistic analysis are essential for addressing the multifaceted nature of these risks. This multidisciplinary approach is crucial for assessing and analyzing systemic risk as well as developing effective mitigation and management strategies.

3.3 Synopsis: The Relationship between Polycrisis and Systemic Risk

In an increasingly interconnected and complex world, the relationship between polycrisis and systemic risk has gained significant attention. Although these concepts are intimately related, they are also distinct (Lawrence et al. 2024b).

Polycrisis incorporates two core features of systemic risks. First, they both arise from the high degree of interconnectivity among system elements, where a single disruption can generate cascading impacts throughout the system. Second, both imply that discernible boundaries separate one system from another, although discrete systems may influence each other by exchanging energy, matter, information, and people (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022; Lawrence et al. 2024a; Lawrence et al. 2024c; Renn 2024).

However, polycrisis differs from systemic risk in three important aspects (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022). First, the studies on systemic risk are primarily focused on the pre-crisis conditions looking into the drivers and causes for interrelated disasters and suggesting potential measures and policies to avoid, prevent, or mitigate these risks. The studies on polycrisis also include the investigation of causal roots of each crisis element but are more focused on how to handle multiple crises once these interconnected crises have manifested themselves. Second, systemic risk is generally assumed to arise within a single system, whereas polycrisis emphasizes the causal entanglement of crises across multiple systems, including coincidences that are not causally related but connected through interacting impacts. This distinction is well established by the concepts of intra-systemic and inter-systemic impacts (Lawrence et al. 2024a). Finally, while systemic risk literature highlights the complexity and nature of interacting risks, polycrisis underscores the complexity of the systems’ environment in which these risks arise (Lawrence, Janzwood, et al. 2022; Lawrence et al. 2024a). Figure 2 provides an overview of the evolution of the debate on systemic risk and polycrisis.

[Figure omitted]

3.4 Challenges for Risk Assessment, Governance, and Communication

The increasingly interconnected and complex world, the emergence of polycrisis and systemic risk—where multiple crises occur simultaneously and interact with each other—presents significant challenges for risk assessment, governance, and communication (Renn 2024). In risk assessment, one of the main challenges is addressing the complex interdependencies between different types of risks. Economic, social, environmental, and political crises do not occur in isolation; they are interconnected through intricate feedback loops (Schweizer 2021). Also, polycrisis situations often exhibit nonlinear dynamics, where small changes in one area can lead to disproportionately large impacts elsewhere (Lucas et al. 2018b). In addition, the combined effect of multiple crises can give rise to emergent properties—outcomes that are not predictable by analyzing individual crises in isolation (Scheffer et al. 2009). Accurate risk assessment relies on the availability of comprehensive data, which are often scarce, incomplete, or difficult to obtain (Sillmann et al. 2022).

Governance in the context of polycrisis is often hindered by fragmented structures and siloed approaches (Renn 2008; Pildes 2023). Different sectors and agencies may operate independently, with limited coordination and communication. This fragmentation can lead to inefficiencies and gaps in the response to crises. Also, polycrisis situations are characterized by rapid changes and high levels of uncertainty. Therefore, enhancing the adaptability and flexibility of governance systems is essential for managing systemic risks (Pildes 2023). Besides, effective governance requires the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector, and local communities (Klinke and Renn 2014). While engaging these diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes can be challenging, they add valuable information and experiential insights for assessing and managing risks. In addition, managing polycrisis requires significant resources, including financial, human, and technical capacities. Many governance structures, particularly in developing regions, may lack the necessary resources to effectively address systemic risks (Sillmann et al. 2022).

#### The knock-on effects of eroded capacity create unique systemic vulnerabilities, particularly federal debt, disaster response, public health, AND ports.

Arhan Menta & Dr. Joost Santos 25, Scholar, Pete Conrad Challenge; PhD, MS, Associate Professor, Engineering Management & Systems Engineering, George Washington University. Former Research Professor, Systems Engineering, University of Virginia, "Systems Modeling and Policy Implications of Reducing the Workforce of the US Federal Government," Risk Analysis, Early View, 12/01/2025, Wiley Online Library. [italics in original]

The psychosocial impacts of such sudden and large-scale job loss are significant. Prior research has established strong links between disaster-related employment shocks and increased risks of anxiety, depression, and occupational disengagement (Reifels et al. 2013; Norris et al. 2002). Beyond the mental health burden, workforce displacement creates long-term socioeconomic ripple effects, including decreased household spending, weakened local economies, and increased fiscal strain on social safety nets. The large number of affected federal workers—many of whom have specialized skills—raises concerns about potential cascading institutional vulnerabilities, especially in disaster response, public health, and infrastructure management.

This issue can be further explored through systems-based modeling and economic simulation. Systems thinking allows a comprehensive examination of how federal workforce reductions interact with interconnected public sector functions, resulting in emergent and potentially nonlinear outcomes. Tools like system dynamics modeling or agent-based modeling can track feedback loops and delays in agency performance, public service delivery, and institutional resilience (Sterman 2000). In addition, macroeconomic tools such as the economic Input-Output (IO) model and computable general equilibrium (CGE) models can assess the regional and sectoral effects of federal job losses. These models simulate how labor shocks spread through economic connections—such as affecting private contractors, supply chains, and consumer markets—while considering labor mobility, wage impacts, and re-employment barriers (Rose and Liao 2005; Okuyama and Santos 2014).

In addition, systems engineering approaches offer effective frameworks for measuring the functional decline of complex, interconnected systems caused by workforce reductions. The *Inoperability Input-Output Model* (IIM) extends traditional input-output economic models by representing the level of functional inoperability (or performance loss) in interconnected sectors due to disruptions (Santos and Haimes 2004). The IIM uses a system-of-systems perspective to capture cascading effects of partial or total failures across infrastructure, administrative functions, and service delivery, providing quantitative measures of systemic resilience and vulnerability. Applying the IIM to federal workforce downsizing helps identify critical nodes—departments or functions—where job cuts produce disproportionate ripple effects on government operations and public service outcomes (Santos 2020).

Understanding the full scope of these impacts is crucial for risk analysts and policy makers aiming to reduce downstream effects and develop balanced trade-offs between administrative efficiency and societal resilience. Given the size and suddenness of DOGE-mandated workforce reductions, there is a vital need to assess both immediate and hidden consequences through integrated modeling approaches based on risk analysis, systems engineering, and public policy research.

2 Review of Supporting Models

2.1 The IIM: Mapping Interdependencies

The Leontief Input-Output (IO) model is a fundamental economic framework used to analyze the interdependence among industries and measure how shocks in one sector spread through the economy (Leontief 1936). By illustrating fixed, linear relationships between inputs and outputs, the model is especially useful for evaluating the immediate economic effects of workforce disruptions, where substitution effects are minimal or nonexistent.

IO models are widely used to analyze both direct and indirect effects of labor supply shocks on economic productivity and sector outputs. For example, Akhtar and Santos (2013) employed spatial input-output modeling to assess regional economic resilience following disaster-related workforce losses, demonstrating how employment declines in one sector impact connected industries. Likewise, Miller and Blair (2009) highlight the IO model's usefulness in capturing cascading impacts from disruptions in labor-intensive sectors. Another notable example is the 10-day shutdown of the Los Angeles port in 2002, which caused an estimated economic loss of $2 billion. It highlights the fragility of the global supply chain, and the extensive effects labor strikes can have on international trade (Jung et al. 2009). This incident acts as a key case study for stakeholders seeking to reduce risks related to port operational delays and improve overall resilience.

A key advantage of the Leontief Input-Output (IO) model is its relatively low data requirements compared to more complex approaches, such as CGE models. This makes it especially useful for quick assessments of workforce reductions, including large-scale layoffs in public agencies, where detailed behavioral parameters and substitution elasticities are often not available (Santos 2020). However, the model's fixed production coefficients limit its ability to account for price changes, input substitution, and dynamic labor market reactions, which can restrict its accuracy for long-term analysis. Despite these limitations, the Leontief Input-Output (IO) model remains a useful tool in risk analysis for estimating the cascading economic impacts of workforce disruptions and guiding policy decisions to mitigate economic losses. Mathematically, the IO model is expressed as:

[Equation omitted]

where:

* x = vector of total outputs
* A = matrix of technical coefficients representing input requirements per unit output
* y = vector of final demand

The Leontief inverse, (I—A)−1, shows how shocks—such as workforce reductions—spread through the interconnected structure of the economy (Miller and Blair 2009).

2.2 The Inoperability IIM: Modeling Disruptions

The Inoperability IIM expands on the traditional Leontief Input-Output framework by emphasizing functional degradation—or inoperability—in interconnected economic and infrastructure systems (Haimes and Jiang 2001, Santos and Haimes 2004). Unlike standard IO models that track output losses, the IIM measures how much sectors cannot operate at full capacity due to disruptions, more effectively capturing cascading effects in complex systems.

This model is useful for analyzing workforce disruptions, where partial labor losses can weaken operational capacity without causing a complete shutdown of output. Akhtar and Santos (2013) showed the IIM's ability to model resilience and recovery by simulating workforce shortages and their cascading effects across connected sectors. Additionally, Lian and Himes (2006) used the IIM to evaluate how interdependencies increase the systemic impacts of labor reductions, revealing vulnerabilities in government and critical infrastructure sectors.

The IIM framework integrates well with risk analysis by enabling scenario-based assessments of workforce reduction impacts, helping policymakers develop targeted mitigation and recovery strategies (Santos et al. 2013). Its ability to consider both direct and indirect effects of inoperability makes the IIM a valuable tool for understanding and managing the complex dynamics of workforce disruptions in modern economies.

Building on this foundation, future research could consider dynamic extensions of the framework. While the IIM captures system performance at a single point in time, a dynamic formulation (DIIM) would trace how inoperability evolves during recovery or prolonged disruption. Such a model could highlight feedback delays, adaptive responses, and persistent vulnerabilities, providing policymakers with insight into how immediate shocks evolve into long-term systemic risks.

The IIM assumes fixed technical relationships between sectors, which limits its ability to capture substitution effects, adaptive behaviors, or nonlinear recovery dynamics. Its outputs depend heavily on the accuracy of input data, such as sectoral demand shocks and interdependencies, which may not be fully transparent in government reporting. Moreover, as an essentially static framework, the IIM offers a snapshot of cascading disruptions but does not represent long-term resilience or recovery processes.

2.3 CGE Models: Capturing System-Wide Adjustments

CGE models have become powerful tools for analyzing the economic effects of labor force disruptions and other systemic shocks. By simulating the behavior of interdependent agents and markets across an economy, CGE models provide a dynamic view of how supply-side disturbances spread through production, consumption, trade, and labor markets (Shoven and Whalley 1992; Böhringer and Rutherford 2008). Their basis in neoclassical microeconomic theory allows the models to reflect price adjustments, resource reallocation, and substitution among inputs—mechanisms especially relevant when analyzing the aftermath of layoffs or sudden changes in labor availability.

In workforce disruption scenarios—ranging from disaster-induced displacement to public-sector downsizing—CGE models have been used to evaluate both immediate and cascading economic effects. For example, Rose and Liao (2005) used a regional CGE framework to assess the impact of water service interruptions, highlighting adaptive responses in employment and interindustry linkages. These models are especially useful for capturing long-term equilibrium results and resilience dynamics, where policy actions and market mechanisms gradually rebalance the system (Rose 2013).

However, certain limitations remain. CGE models rely on a range of behavioral assumptions—such as elasticities of substitution and the mobility of labor and capital—that may not hold in the short term, especially in sectors with rigid institutional structures or specialized labor forces (Okuyama and Santos 2014). Additionally, CGE models tend to underestimate economic losses because they assume substitution among goods and services can happen quickly—an assumption that often does not hold, especially in short-term analyses (Albala-Bertrand 2013).

In situations like sudden government layoffs, where reallocation options are limited and wage responses are quick, assuming efficient market clearing may underestimate short-term disruptions (Santos 2020). Additionally, CGE simulations often show smaller economic impact estimates compared to Input-Output (IO) models, partly because of the compensatory interactions within their structure, where some losses are offset internally (Rose 2004). These differences emphasize the need to combine CGE with IO and systems-based approaches to gain a more thorough understanding of both immediate and long-term labor market vulnerabilities.

3 Case Example: DOGE-Era Federal Workforce Reductions

When analyzing the economic impacts of large-scale workforce disruptions, such as those caused by the DOGE layoffs, choosing an appropriate modeling framework is essential. Both Input-Output (IO) and CGE models are commonly used to evaluate economic ripple effects. However, they differ fundamentally in structure, data needs, and assumptions about economic behavior.

IO models, introduced by Leontief (1936), depict fixed inter-industry connections and the movement of goods and services between sectors, assuming linear production methods and no substitution. The main advantage of IO modeling is its relative simplicity and lower data requirements compared to CGE models (Miller and Blair 2009). This makes IO models especially useful for quick impact assessments where detailed behavioral data—like elasticities of substitution, consumer preferences, or labor mobility—are missing or unreliable.

CGE models include microeconomic foundations and allow flexible substitution between inputs, endogenous price adjustments, and resource reallocation in response to shocks (Böhringer and Rutherford 2008; Shoven and Whalley 1992). While these features make simulations more realistic in dynamic or market-adjusting economies, they also add complexity, demand extensive calibration, and often depend on assumptions about quick economic adaptation.

In the context of DOGE workforce disruptions, these features of IO models provide specific benefits:

* *Economic Inertia and Rigidity*: The federal government labor market and related sectors show structural inertia with limited short-term flexibility. Layoffs of specialized federal employees cannot be quickly offset by substitution or rapid resource reallocation, making CGE assumptions about elasticity less applicable. IO models better reflect these rigid interdependencies and immediate impact propagation (Okuyama and Santos 2014).
* *Data Availability*: Comprehensive and reliable behavioral parameters for CGE models are often lacking, especially in government sectors. IO models utilize existing economic census data and inter-industry transaction tables, allowing for a timely assessment without the need for extensive additional data collection (Barker and Santos 2010).
* *Transparency and Interpretability*: The linear structure of IO models makes it easier to interpret and communicate results to policymakers and stakeholders, which is vital during quick policy responses to workforce shocks (Yu et al. 2014).
* *Integration with Systems Engineering*: IO models can be seamlessly integrated into systems engineering frameworks, such as the Inoperability IIM, enabling the quantification of functional degradation and systemic resilience in complex, interconnected infrastructures and institutions (Ali and Santos 2015; Tatar et al. 2022).

While CGE models remain effective for long-term policy simulations involving market adjustments, the nature of DOGE's sudden federal workforce reductions-where short-term economic rigidity and direct inter-sectoral linkages dominate—makes IO modeling a more practical and suitable choice for initial risk and resilience analysis.

Therefore, this study employs the IO model and its IIM extension to simulate the cascading economic effects of federal workforce reductions resulting from the DOGE mandate. The analysis employs the most recent data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), specifically the Annual Input-Output Tables and the Benchmark Make and Use Tables (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2025a).

The estimation of sector-specific demand shocks used a structured, evidence-based approach. Agencies and programs were linked to their respective BEA sectors and estimated funding changes were calculated from FY 2024–2025 budget requests, OMB documents, and agency reports. When detailed data were scarce, conservative assumptions were made based on budget trends and qualitative cues from these sources. Each identified reduction was converted into a demand shock weighted by the department or entity's share of total sector output, as estimated using BEA gross output data (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2025b).

In the General Federal Enterprises (GFE) sector, a four-part segmentation was used to estimate shocks. A 10% demand shock was applied to USPS, based on persistent financial deficits and diminishing congressional support, despite structural reforms under the Postal Service Reform Act (U.S. Postal Service 2025). USPS was estimated to account for approximately 50% of total GFE output (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2025a). Amtrak, assumed to contribute around 20% of the sector's output, was modeled with a 25% shock based on reductions to Northeast Corridor capital funding outlined in FY 2025 documents (U.S. Department of Transportation 2025; Amtrak 2025). TVA, contributing an estimated 10%, delayed planned infrastructure investments, justifying a 5% shock (Tennessee Valley Authority 2024). For the remaining roughly 20% of output—attributed to smaller federal enterprises—an assumed 5% shock was applied in the absence of specific fiscal data, informed by similar structural constraints. Taken together, these estimations yielded a composite demand shock of approximately 12.7% for the GFE sector.

For the General Federal Government Defense (GFGD), although the FY 2025 budget proposed a 4.1% increase in the top line (White House 2024), internal documents revealed uneven shifts within the sector. Delays in procurement, civilian downsizing, and cuts in R&D and support operations were noted across multiple sources (American Association for the Advancement of Science 2025, p. 45; GAO 2024). After a qualitative assessment of these changes, it was estimated that 25% of the sector experienced significant disruption. A 40% shock was applied to this portion—mainly due to reductions in non-combat and administrative functions—while the remaining 75% was considered stable. These assumptions resulted in a weighted demand shock of 10% for the sector.

For General Federal Government Nondefense (GFGN), a mixed-method estimation was used. Departments with clearly documented cuts—such as the Department of Education, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—were analyzed thoroughly. These agencies, which are estimated to make up about 13% of total GFGN output (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2025a), showed different levels of reduction in their FY 2025 budget requests, with a weighted average shock of 6.6% based on specific line items (White House 2024). For the remaining roughly 87% of the sector—consisting of a wide range of agencies without transparent or uniform reporting—a conservative 8% shock was applied, based on general trends in discretionary caps, hiring freezes, and delayed project funding (Reuters 2025; Congressional Research Service 2024). Combining both parts results in a total estimated demand shock of 13.56% for the GFGN sector. Table 1 summarizes the parameters that were used in the Inoperability IIM.

[Table omitted]

4 Analysis of Results

Figures 1 and 2 display the top 10 most affected sectors based on two metrics: economic loss and inoperability. Economic loss indicates the financial value of the loss for each sector. We used the annual BEA input-output data, which includes 71 sectors. Using the workforce perturbation inputs from the previous section, our analysis shows a total loss of $127 billion. Figure 1 highlights the top 10 sectors with the highest economic losses, representing about 77% of the total loss.

[Figures omitted]

While economic loss remains the most prominent and well-understood metric—often guiding policy decisions because of its direct connection to GDP and fiscal impact—it does not fully capture the systemic vulnerability of sectors that may be less economically prominent but are operationally vital for recovery. Therefore, the inoperability metric emphasizes how much a sector cannot function during or after a disruption, regardless of its monetary value. This distinction is important: sectors with a low GDP share but high interdependencies might not cause immediate economic loss but can significantly slow down or disrupt the recovery process if overlooked. Figure 2, meanwhile, displays the top 10 most affected sectors in terms of inoperability.

While the direct demand shocks to federal sectors were expected, the more revealing insights come from the propagated effects across the wider economy—especially in industries that, although not directly targeted, faced significant disruptions because of their structural reliance on federal activity. Among these, Other Transportation Equipment (S16), Water Transportation (S34), and Computer and Electronic Products (S13) clearly show how federal funding cuts ripple through interconnected supply chains, often hitting high-complexity, capital-intensive industries hardest.

Other Transportation Equipment (S16) experienced a $3.82 billion output loss and an inoperability rate of 0.85%, making it one of the most impacted sectors both in total and proportionally. This category includes aerospace manufacturing, shipbuilding, and defense-related vehicle systems—industries closely tied to federal procurement channels. The sector's high inoperability highlights its systemic vulnerability: when federal defense budgets slow down or shift priorities—as seen in FY 2025 delays to procurement cycles and reallocation of funds—large-scale projects are often postponed or canceled. This leads to immediate effects not only for prime contractors like Boeing or Lockheed Martin but also for regional networks of Tier 2 and Tier 3 suppliers that rely on stable workflows. Adding to this is the long lead time for production: even minor disruptions can cause layoffs, tooling halts, and R&D delays, creating sustained economic challenges, especially in Virginia, Alabama, and Southern California—the regions where this industry is concentrated.

The disruption to Water Transportation (S34) is also notable. Although it did not rank high in overall output loss, its 0.32% inoperability indicates a significant vulnerability. This sector, which encompasses port services, inland waterway transport, and dredging operations, relies heavily on federally maintained infrastructure and funding from agencies such as the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Maritime Administration. When discretionary funds are cut—as happened in the FY 2025 budget—routine dredging, maintenance grants, and modernization projects are often the first to be postponed. This leads to limited movement of goods and services, especially at major ports like New Orleans, Norfolk, and Savannah, where federal support covers both physical upkeep and daily operations. Even small delays or reductions can cause ripple effects that disrupt the efficiency of entire shipping routes.

Computer and Electronic Products (S13) shows how both total output decline ($1.83 billion) and inoperability (0.41%) highlight systemic dependence. Although this sector is large and diverse, including semiconductors, computing hardware, defense electronics, and telecommunications equipment, its federal exposure mainly comes from high-value contracts for secure systems, satellite technology, and defense communications. As civilian and non-combat defense budgets cut back on R&D and administrative support, the volume of contracts for advanced technology systems decreased. Unlike traditional manufacturing, the vulnerability here isn't volume but precision: delays in even a few key projects—such as a DOD satellite upgrade or secure server deployment—can halt specialized production lines. The sector's intricate global supply chains increase these risks. A canceled government order in DC might reduce demand for a particular chip from a supplier in Arizona, which then affects raw material procurement from overseas. The economic impact reverberates downstream.

Together, these sectors show that the effects of federal spending cuts are not just fiscal—they are systemic. The IIM model indicates that sectors with long project timelines, technical specialization, and dependence on federal contracts are especially vulnerable. This sensitivity may not be linked solely to sector size but rather to their structural entanglement in federal priorities. In this context, traditional top-down budget analyses often miss second- and third-order effects that play out in manufacturing timelines, port logistics, and high-tech production runs. The findings emphasize the need for systems-based forecasting in policymaking—especially when budget shifts affect complex industrial ecosystems that support not only jobs but also national infrastructure, innovation, and defense readiness.

5 Validation of Results

Recall that, using annual BEA input-output data across 71 sectors and applying the previously described workforce loss scenarios, the analysis estimates a total economic loss of $127 billion. This estimate aligns with loss estimates reported by other sources.

For example, analysis by CBS News estimated that the total cost of DOGE's actions reached approximately $135 billion, effectively offsetting the claimed savings (CBS News 2025). These losses originated from multiple sources: $14.7 billion in buyout packages offered to departing employees, $6.7 billion in administrative leave paid to federal workers whose departures were delayed, and tens of billions more in lost productivity, legal disputes, and transition costs (CBS News 2025; Washington Post 2025).

The largest hidden cost was reduced institutional productivity. Analysts discovered that thousands of essential service positions—such as tax collection, weather forecasting, and housing administration—were vacated or left unfilled, significantly hampering agency operations. For example, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), facing a 40% cut in enforcement staff, is expected to lose up to $323 billion in federal revenue over the next decade due to reduced audit and compliance efforts (CBS News 2025). This revenue loss far exceeds any short-term fiscal savings. It illustrates the multiplier effect that targeted public sector layoffs can have on long-term government effectiveness and tax collection.

The federal government also faced direct administrative costs for managing the exodus of employees. By mid-2025, more than 154,000 workers were being paid not to work, either because of phased separation agreements or due to reclassification errors during hurried restructuring efforts (Washington Post 2025). These arrangements, originally intended as transitional measures, cost the government over $21 billion in just the first two quarters after the rollout of DOGE.

Further adding to the losses were indirect costs related to the disruption of existing federal contracts and grant programs. While the DOGE program cited canceled contracts as a source of savings, many of these contracts were already nearing expiration. Others were crucial to federally mandated programs and had to be reissued at higher rates due to rushed procurement and legal disputes. A report by The Global Treasurer estimated that up to 80% of DOGE's claimed savings might have been overstated or double-counted, and that agencies faced an additional 165,000 h per week in administrative inefficiencies caused by hurried reorganizations (The Global Treasurer 2025).

Overall, the estimated losses continue to grow as we are still unaware of the full macroeconomic impact, including reduced consumer spending by laid-off workers, lowered service quality, and increased costs for rehiring and retraining staff in the future. Although DOGE was presented as a revolutionary cost-saving reform, mounting evidence shows that its fiscal impact was either neutral or possibly negative when all downstream effects are considered.

Beyond the modeled results, certain systemic risks remain unaccounted for but warrant attention. Chief among these is the potential erosion of the US scientific and research community under sustained budget cuts, which could permanently diminish technological leadership relative to China or the European Union. Estimating such future economic and strategic losses remains an open challenge for risk analysts, highlighting deeper epistemic uncertainties that extend beyond current modeling capabilities.

6 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

While CBS News (2025) reports that federal workforce reductions under DOGE are estimated to cost taxpayers $135 billion, the methodology behind this figure is only partially transparent. The estimate, attributed to the Partnership for Public Service, is derived from aggregate federal compensation data and adjustments for paid leave, rehiring, and productivity losses. However, the specific assumptions, weighting of categories, and estimation procedures are not disclosed, and essential cost elements such as litigation and lost IRS revenue are excluded. As such, the CBS figure should be interpreted as a broad approximation rather than a validated benchmark for comparison against the IIM model outputs.

The 2025 federal workforce reductions—implemented across multiple agencies—have had far-reaching effects not only on government operations but also on broader economic systems. In this article, we used a systems-based modeling approach, employing Input-Output (IO) and Inoperability IIM, to analyze the cascading economic impacts of these reductions. Their findings highlight how workforce disruptions in the federal sector can spread across interdependent industries, leading to significant financial losses that go beyond the public sector itself.

Using data from the BEA and agency-level budget documents, the study estimates that key sectors such as Other Transportation Equipment, Water Transportation, and Computer and Electronic Products were especially impacted due to their strong connections to federal contracts and infrastructure funding. For example, aerospace and defense suppliers experienced project delays and reduced output, affecting not only major contractors but also regional supply chains. Similarly, port operations faced operational constraints due to decreased maintenance funding, while high-tech industries encountered disruptions in specialized contract execution.

Our analysis, using input-output data, revealed a total economic loss from workforce reductions of roughly $127 billion, based on output decreases, inoperability measures, and secondary effects on supply chains and government services. This estimate matches independent assessments by CBS News, which estimated losses around $135 billion. The Washington Post (2025) also reported over $21 billion in expenses related to separation agreements and administrative issues. Notably, analysts predict that reduced staffing at revenue-generating agencies—such as the Internal Revenue Service—could cause substantial long-term federal income losses, with up to $323 billion in unrealized tax revenue over 10 years due to fewer audits and diminished compliance enforcement. In addition, DOGE-driven cuts at the IRS are expected to lead to an annual loss of about $500 billion in federal tax revenue, as the watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington found that workforce reductions greatly weakened audit and compliance capacity (Kilander 2025).

These cross-validated estimates emphasize the importance of evaluating the broader economic impacts of public workforce decisions. The IIM framework provides additional insights by measuring the decline in sectors that depend on federal activities, showing that even sectors not directly impacted by budget cuts can face significant operational setbacks due to structural interdependencies.

#### Federal budgeting is key to quick crisis adaptation. That caps existential risks.

Dr. F. Stevens Redburn 21, PhD, Professorial Lecturer, Public Policy and Public Administration, George Washington University, "Budgeting for Existential Crisis: The Federal Government as Society's Guarantor," Public Budgeting & Finance, Vol. 41, pg. 5-21, 05/19/2021, Wiley Online Library. [italics in original]

Ordinary crises—such as natural disasters—are budgetary emergencies that require additional resources: First, for relief and, later, for recovery. Appropriations for these purposes are privileged in the process by being put on a fast track and, when there are caps on appropriated amounts, by being outside of or exempt from the caps.1 Extraordinary emergencies—such as superstorm Sandy or the 2008 financial crisis—demand and, in addition to relief and recovery, may lead to proposals for reforms to address flaws in existing policies or social arrangements that either contributed to the crisis or complicated responses, thereby making the crisis more damaging than it needed to be. The primary responses to both run-of-the-mill and extraordinary crises are conservative in the sense that they are largely intended to restore the prior state of affairs and to mitigate the risk of recurrence.

The effects of events like the pandemic are of a different order, exposing deeper structural vulnerabilities and posing a fundamental challenge to established institutions; therefore, these could be labeled existential crises. Historically, the United States has experienced such crises rarely—in the period leading to the Civil War and again in the Great Depression and World War II. The 2008–2009 financial crisis might have posed a similar existential threat if a swift, coordinated response by the federal government had not successfully stabilized the nation's finances on the brink of economic meltdown. These rare events—in addition to doing immediate damage—raise questions about the viability of the established order. Meeting the resulting demands calls for resource investments to make society less vulnerable and more resilient to future shocks. Such profound crises expose structural weaknesses, potentially threatening the social order and its governing institutions with loss of legitimacy; this, in turn, may produce further disruption. Demands for governmental response to existential crises go beyond efforts to relieve suffering and repair damage, or reforms to restore the established order. Such events generate pressures for profound social reformation, raising questions about the stability or viability of the established social structure and often feeding support for far-reaching change. Meeting these demands may require a program of radical reconstruction to address inequities and repair fissures exposed by the crisis. Such a program, if it emerges, is likely to be formed and adopted over a period far longer than that required for initial crisis responses.

Viewed from a budgetary perspective, existential crises have two sets of effects that distinguish them from ordinary crises or even major societal emergencies: Disrupting or bypassing the normal budget process and its constraints; and evoking the federal government's implicit constitutional role as guarantor of the economic and social order. Procedurally, the exigencies of responding to existential crises make a mockery of budget baselines, CBO scoring of pending legislation, spending caps, resource prioritization, deficit and debt targets—all the apparatus of normal budgeting. The normal near-term constraints and targets for fiscal choice lose their utility as guides for budgeters, and extraordinary procedures are invoked. By convention, the budget effects of legislation are estimated against current law, and the baseline set by CBO at the beginning of the calendar year provides a basis for comparison with the President's budget and other proposed legislation. The first four budget bills enacted after the pandemic were scored by CBO against a baseline that bore no resemblance to the course of current law spending and revenues or the course of the economy starting in the second quarter. Moreover, the high level of uncertainty about the interaction between budgets and the economy during a pandemic make the standard methods and assumptions for estimating a baseline that assumes continuation of current policies of dubious value. Although CBO went through the motions of scoring the costs of pending budget legislation against current law, its estimates were not particularly useful or effective given the urgency driving immediate action. In adopting budget bills to address needs arising from the pandemic, Congress evaded previously enacted limits on appropriations by invoking the emergency exception2 and standing requirements that otherwise would automatically sequester amounts of mandatory spending unless actions that increase the deficit are offset. These requirements were waived without challenge. Substantively, as described below, Congress quickly authorized spending and revenue reductions to support a range of actions that no one had contemplated when the President's budget was transmitted in February 2020.

The federal role as society's guarantor

Existential crises demand and may yield fiscal responses arising from the federal government's role as ultimate guarantor not only of the economy but of the social order. The federal government's responsibilities as society's ultimate guarantor are not recognized in the budget as a distinct program or functional category, and may be executed through hundreds of programmatic channels, which will vary depending on the nature of a particular emergency and stages of response and recovery. The federal government's guarantor responsibility is not well-delimited. It encompasses not only formal reinsurance contracts as a financial mechanism to protect primary insurers from catastrophic losses, but also broader measures to backstop and stabilize a society experiencing loss and damage from an event of overwhelming scale. In the United States, only the federal government has the resources and range of powers and tools for this.

The guarantor role transcends the federal government's programs to address lesser crises. The government has an array of standing authorities to be deployed in the face of natural or manmade disasters or other emergencies. These include the disaster response programs administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, programs of insurance against floods, crop damage, mechanisms to minimize financial instability, and others. In addition to these explicit programs, however, the federal government has an implicit constitutional responsibility for the society's welfare and survival that it will exercise primarily when the magnitude of the emergency overwhelms standing mechanisms and poses an existential challenge.

While the federal government's guarantor role may be exercised through standing authorities, its responsibility to protect the social order also manifests itself through ad hoc and various channels, many of them invented or redirected on the fly. The government's role in stabilizing and sustaining social order was demonstrated during the financial crisis, as the federal government quickly devised a suite of novel policy responses to shore up and stabilize the financial system. The role was manifested in that crisis, for example, through enactment of the Troubled Asset Recovery Act program, a broad authority that was deployed in ways not anticipated at the time it was established and through an innovative partnership between Treasury and the Federal Reserve, which discovered powers few knew it possessed, to undergird and stabilize the financial system.

In its narrowest sense, the guarantor role takes the form of reinsurance, that is, explicit contractual commitments to back up primary private insurers when insured losses threaten to bankrupt them or when they are asked to insure risks that could not otherwise be quantified and priced in the marketplace. The government may act as reinsurer either by creating its own insurance program or by limiting the liability of private insurers for specified risks, thereby transferring this liability to the public. Certain risks are so infrequent and can be of such magnitude and so unpredictable that private insurance markets cannot develop to offer coverage; reinsurance capping the risk of private insurers helps solve this problem. For example, the government's reinsurance role was formalized following the September 11 attacks with enactment of a terrorism reinsurance program. This backstop to private insurers accompanied a requirement for those companies to offer businesses terrorism coverage.

Other manifestations of the guarantor role do not take the form of formal contractual arrangements that define the triggering circumstances or delimit the government's obligations. The boundaries of the role are unclear and a matter of ongoing debate. For example, some federal entitlements expand automatically in the wake of an economic shock to help cushion individuals from its effects. Food assistance to the poor and unemployment insurance are examples. Although designed primarily to address more localized and smaller economic downturns or dislocations, these established channels cushion vulnerable people from the full impact of larger systemic shocks and help stabilize or restore economic activity. The same funding channels provide established means to quickly extend benefits to people who might not be eligible for regular entitlements or relax other conditions on assistance.

Absent formal contractual commitments, the extent of the government's guarantor responsibility and the exact circumstances that will trigger federal assistance are left to the discretion of policymakers. One important but discretionary manifestation of the societal guarantor role arises from the nature of the U.S. federal system and from constitutional or legal limits on the ability of individual States to run operating deficits or borrow without limit. Nearly all states are constitutionally prohibited from running significant operating deficits and are blocked by both legal limits and market forces from financing unexpected costs with debt. Local governments are even more constrained. To deal with this, the federal government's guarantor role during an existential crisis includes funding the states' fiscal gaps in real time. The federal government's role in response to the pandemic or other large shocks might be viewed as an extension of its countercyclical role in recessions as described in Driessen and Hughes (2020, 11–12). By August 2020, the States collectively faced the need to close budget shortfalls of almost 10% in the current fiscal year and were projected to have combined budget shortfalls exceeding $500 billion through 2022 (Leachman 2020). Given the destabilizing nature of this structural feature of the U.S. federal system and the ability of the federal government to borrow to finance states' current needs, the federal government might have chosen to establish a standing stabilization mechanism for additional fiscal support to be triggered under these extreme circumstances. The absence of such a mechanism reflects a lack of consensus about the nature and limits of the federal government's responsibility to help other governments that are more fiscally constrained. Largely partisan debates reflecting this disagreement have hampered ad hoc measures to aid states and localities, threatening to disrupt essential services and retard economic recovery.3

An existential crisis, unlike lesser ones, exposes underlying structural problems and leads to demands to address these, giving national leaders the political opportunity to pursue a larger policy agenda. An early signal in Europe that the pandemic was a crisis of this order came in March 2020 from former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi (quoted in Financial Times, March 25, 2020):

The challenge we face is how to act with sufficient strength and speed to prevent the recession from morphing into a prolonged depression, made deeper by a plethora of defaults leaving irreversible damage. It is already clear that the answer must involve a significant increase in public debt. The loss of income incurred by the private sector—and any debt raised to fill the gap—must eventually be absorbed, wholly or in part, on to government balance sheets. Much higher public debt levels will become a permanent feature of our economies… It is the proper role of the state to deploy its balance sheet to protect citizens and the economy against shocks that the private sector is not responsible for and cannot absorb. States have always done so in the face of national emergencies.

In broadest form, the federal government's responsibilities as societal guarantor include reforms to address structural inequities that leave parts of the population more vulnerable in the face of a pandemic or other crisis. Social equity, a policy goal in its own right, is instrumental to strengthening the society's capacity to weather existential threats. Although the New Deal is often “characterized as relief, recovery, and reform,” the programs enacted during that era “not only helped to grow the economy…; they also created… new federal institutions… greatly expanded the role of the federal government in American life… [and] transformed the face of the nation” (Conlan et al., 2016, 39–40). Similarly, actions to address systemic racism and expand access to health care, employment, and schooling can make a society more prepared for and more resilient to future shocks. This aspect of the federal government's guarantor role is likely to manifest more slowly than others following a crisis, perhaps as in the case of the New Deal taking decades to reshape policy and budget priorities to address structural problems revealed by crisis. In the end, these responses have a more profound effect on social structure and viability than short-term measures aimed at relief and recovery.

It seems inescapable that the federal government will continue to play the role of society's guarantor. It has the ultimate constitutional responsibility and, under duress, is the only set of institutions with the capacity to ensure life and well-being for this generation and those to follow. Although the role involves a broad array of policy instruments—including in the present case actions to promote social distancing and invocation of the Defense Production Act to expand the supply of essential supplies—the budget is the central instrument for mobilizing public resources to address such an emergency.

FEDERAL FISCAL RESPONSES

In March and April 2020, the United States experienced the first wave of illness and death from the virus. Much economic activity was suspended, and the U.S. economy fell into a deep ravine. Initial federal government responses to the surging pandemic showed real urgency, as evidenced by the scale and speed of enactment, emergency designation of appropriations, and waiver of the Pay-As-You-Go sequester trigger for mandatory spending and revenue changes. Responses focused on both immediate health-care and economic relief and income replacement. Some provisions also looked ahead to support for the recovery through public health measures, vaccine development, and expanded access to treatment. Congress quickly passed and the President signed four major bills authorizing a 10-year total of $2 trillion in additional spending and nearly $500 billion in revenue reductions (see Table 1). The largest financial commitments were for business loans through a joint program administered by the Treasury and Federal Reserve and forgivable loans to be awarded by the Small Business Administration, not only for small and large businesses but also for health providers, airlines, colleges, and nonprofit organizations. The CARES Act provided $150 billion in general fiscal support to state, territorial, local, and tribal governments. Congress authorized grants to universities and schools for COVID relief and provided tax relief to affected businesses and households, income support in the form of food assistance and augmented unemployment insurance, and health funding for COVID responses by several agencies.

Outside the legislative process, the Federal Reserve Board quickly took extraordinary actions through multiple facilities, with the help of Treasury-administered guarantees, pledging to provide up to $7 dollars in liquidity and credit for enterprises and to purchase Treasury debt, state and municipal debt, mortgage-backed securities, and corporate bonds. While not authorized through the budget process and not conventionally defined as fiscal policy, a coordinated effort by the Federal Reserve and Treasury to provide liquidity and backstop private borrowing had an effect on economic activity similar to conventional counter-cyclical stimulus. Administrative actions, principally delays in income and payroll tax deadlines, also provided short-term stimulus.4

By May, it was apparent to many that the economy would not bounce back quickly or fully without further federal support. House Democrats developed legislation for another three trillion dollars of federal spending and tax relief (the HEROES Act), which would provide stimulus and address a range of public health and financial needs, including substantial aid to state and local governments. By the time that bill passed the House, however, the early consensus for federal action that propelled the first enactments had dissipated. By the time Congress entered its August recess, Republicans were split on the need for further aid and negotiations were at an impasse. At the tail end of the lame duck congressional session in December, Congress enacted a fifth coronavirus response measure to extend unemployment and other cash benefits, offer additional protection to low-income renters, aid small businesses, and support recovery with payments to state and local governments for schools and colleges, transportation agencies, and support for vaccine distribution, testing programs, and other health measures. Despite strong pressure to include general fiscal support for state and local governments, this aid was not in the final compromise product. In March 2021, Congress passed the new Administration's “American Rescue Plan” legislation, renewing or extending major elements of previous COVID response bills and providing a new round of state and local fiscal support. A range of new responses brought the total budgetary cost of COVID enactments, as estimated by the CBO, to more than $5.1 trillion (as shown in Table 1). The new legislation included new tax credits for children and child care that, if continued, would substantially improve the economic well-being and prospects of low-income families.

[TABLE omitted]

Assessing the initial response

The pandemic emergency, and recognition that emergencies of such magnitude could arise again, challenge us to rethink both the way budgets are constructed and the objectives of fiscal policy. As a first step, the responses to the pandemic can be categorized and later assessed relative to their policy aims. As noted above, assessments of disaster response typically focus on their success in providing relief and supporting economic recovery. In the CARES Act, for example, income transfers provided $500 billion of relief in 2020, more than the total of all federal income transfers to non-elderly households in the preceding year. Because of its scale and the speed with which budgeted amounts outlayed, the initial response provided substantial relief within weeks to families and business owners. Although unemployment soared, the incomes of many households were less affected for the first few months, greatly reducing hardship during this period and contributing to a partial recovery starting in May that was further aided by partial reopenings in many states (Parolin et al., 2020). But, given the likely course of the disease and the economy, expenditures in this period were seen by many as an initial tranche of what was likely to be a multiyear program of support for restoration of normal social activity and economic recovery. However, with the economy rebounding and the arrival of vaccines in early 2021, largely partisan disagreements emerged over the need for additional measures. The American Rescue Plan passed in March with only Democratic votes; some major provisions, including expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit and new child and child care credits, can be seen less as responses to the pandemic than as steps to address chronic inequality and barriers to employment.

To fully capture and assess how the federal government plays its guarantor role in an extraordinary emergency such as the pandemic, its responses must also be assessed for their contributions to two additional policy objectives: readiness and resilience. These policy goals are supported by public investments that increase society's ability to deal with the crisis aftermath and mitigate or avoid future shocks. Departing from the traditional budgeting standard of technical efficiency, these may encompass investments that in the short term look inefficient or surplus to needs. The readiness objective is generalized from the set of metrics applied in the defense world to assess capacity to respond to military threats.5 This standard can be applied to all public investments intended to prepare the nation to respond appropriately and effectively to the next big shock, whether a known–unknown or an unknown–unknown.6 Resilience has been applied first in environmental policy and later in a homeland security context to investments to harden or quickly restore critical infrastructure and other vital systems. The aim of these policies is to ensure that systems damage is minimized and that damaged systems can be restored or replaced quickly. They include investments to strengthen or broaden safety nets and automatic stabilizers needed when primary systems fail. In contrast to conventional measures of efficiency and lean delivery typically applied to guide budget and policy choices in a world of presumed stability, analysis of policies to increase resilience may view redundancy and buildup of excess capacity as desirable outcomes, similar to the strategy NASA engineers followed for the Apollo mission into extreme conditions where failure was an unacceptable option.7

#### Future public health crises are existential.

Dr. Eoin McLaughlin & Dr. Matthias Beck 25, PhD, Professor of Economics & Head of Research, Department of Accountancy, Economics, & Finance, Edinburgh Business School; PhD, Professor of Management, Cork University Business School, University College Cork, "Managing and Mitigating Future Public Health Risks: Planetary Boundaries, Global Catastrophic Risk, and Inclusive Wealth," Risk Analysis, Vol. 1, pg. 1-25, 01/18/2025, Wiley Online Library.

One conventional GCR-type argument is that pandemics, as GCRs, can be mitigated and/or eliminated via public health interventions (e.g., Kilbourne, 2008). The view that pandemics can be easily mitigated is highly problematic on a number of counts. First, WHO research indicates that many diseases resulted in pandemics that have not been eliminated but rather are prone to ‘‘flare ups,’’ at times of pandemic proportions. Where ‘‘flare ups’’ occur, public health responses are sometimes insufficient with, for example, unequal access to vaccines; an issue that became evident during the 2009 influenza pandemic (Jorgensen et al., 2013). Second, increased presence, and or detection, of zoonotic pandemics again indicate a blurring of boundaries where climate related risk, pressures on food security, and population pressures make traditional PB and GCR boundaries increasingly difficult to define. This is exemplified by the recent avian influenza outbreak in the Russian Federation that, albeit identified as low risk, calamitously paralleled the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (WHO, 2021b).

5 INTERACTION OF PLANETARY BOUNDARIES AND GLOBAL CATASTROPHIC RISKS

Interactions of risky and near-catastrophic events create risks at several levels (Helbing, 2013).18 There is discussion within the GCR literature on the interaction of risks, with research focusing on the impact on food security of a GCR, such as a pandemic or nuclear war (Helfand, 2013; Huff et al., 2015), but this seems less clearly discussed in the PB literature.19 Continuous interactions, at different scales, meanwhile, are seen as integral to the function of social–ecological systems (Reyes et al., 2018). Interactions are foundational to the understanding of complex systems and the aggregation of such interactions can lead to properties greater than the individual components (Cillers, 2013; Jensen, 2023), with key properties of complexity relating to interactions.20 Figure 6 is a representation of the approach taken in systematic risk, if there is only one risk within a system, then an assigning probability of risk to that element will suffice, but if there are multiple elements at risk, then the question becomes whether or not they are related and then, if they are related, what is this relationship (Hochrainer-Stigler, 2020). This relationship may imply dependence (interpreted as correlation) of risks or “tail dependence,” whereby the relationship is found in the tails of the distribution. Thus, an important consideration is whether the interaction of risks implies subadditivity, additivity, or supraadditivity (synergistic interaction) of risk; evidence suggests that the interaction of risks can amplify risks (e.g., Arrigo et al 2020). The challenge with such complex interactions is the difficulty in preparing, controlling, and managing these interactions once they do occur (Helbing, 2013). Synergistic risks would be of greatest concern in the context of PBs and GCRs as the impact would be greater than that of a risk in isolation.

[Figure omitted]

An historical example of how influential such risk interactions can be comes from the worst pandemic in the modern era:21 the 1918 influenza pandemic. Death estimates for this event are close to 3–5% of global population, but contextualization is needed.22 The 1918 pandemic coincided with the end of a global war; the First World War created the ideal conditions for the spread of influenza among a warweary population. Moreover, the war itself appears to have been given a low probability by contemporaries as judged by financial markets (Ferguson, 2006), this is despite historians documenting various international crises in years preceding the war. In contrast to the 1918 influenza pandemic, the less heralded global influenza pandemic of 1889–92 had a much lower death toll, with no other coinciding global phenomena. This demonstrates the dangers of extrapolating lessons from 1918 and applying them to modern events without contextualization- the pandemic was undeniably exacerbated by the global war—but at the same time, this illustrates the importance of the interaction of risks (Doran et al., 2024).

The interaction of risk has led to new understandings of risks that deviate from conventional risk management, such as the cardiovascular disease epidemic in the latter twentieth century, prominent among these are the study of ‘‘systemic risks’’ (Helbing, 2013; Renn et al., 2022). A now classic definition of systemic risk as a breakdown of an entire system rather than individual components of the system was originally applied in the context of financial systems (Kaufman & Scott, 2003). However, with increasing globalization and interconnectedness, the application has spread to various global risks (Lucas et al., 2018). While systemic risk has not been fully integrated in either PB or GCR framework, it is clearly applicable and some aspects of both risk paradigms (e.g., pandemics from infectious diseases, environmental risks, and risks from technology) are considered in early applications of systemic risk thinking (e.g., OECD, 2003). Although as systemic risks tend to be the interaction of individual risks, they tend not to receive the same level of attention as GCRs or PBs (Renn et al., 2022). Richardson et al. (2023) see PBs as being systemic, but this refers only to the Earth System, on which the PBs are based, and not spillovers to other risks or other systems. However, thinking of risks as interacting stresses the importance of not siloing thinking on risk. Effectively, both PBs and GCRs can be seen as extreme systemic risks as they threaten entire systems and the dynamic in which the risks are realized is either endogenously (through failures within the system) or exogenously (external attacks to the system) (Hochrainer-Stigler, 2020). Many of the PBs outlined are endogenous to human society, they are a result of the human system, while many GCRs are exogenous there are some that are endogenous. It is the endogenous risk where PBs and GCRs overlap.

#### Defense is wrong. Contemporary dynamics inflate the risk AND triggers cascading, alternative existential risks.

Dr. Noah B. Taylor 23, PhD, MA, Lecturer, Peace & Conflict Studies, University of Innsbruck, "Existential Risks in Peace and Conflict Studies," in Peace, Pandemics, and Conflict, Chapter 5, 2023, pg. 85-108, Springer. [italics in original]

Though humanity has lived with diseases since its earliest history, the contemporary possibility of such a risk has increased. The global population recently climbed to over 8 billion, and the overall population density continues to increase (Roser et al. 2013). With more individuals, there are more possible origins of new pandemic diseases. As of 2018, 55% of the world’s population lived in urban areas (UN DESA 2018), and an estimated 65% by 2050 (UN DESA 2019). People living closer to one another will likely increase the transmission rates.

Many facets of modern life further increase a pandemic’s possible severity, scope, and scale (Jones et al. 2008; Morse 1995). Deforestation, industrial farming, and meat production practices combined with climate change increase the likelihood of zoonotic transmission of pathogens from animals to humans. The melting permafrost, increased ultraviolet immunosuppression, changing weather patterns, and arctic thawing that comes with global warming may unleash pathogens frozen long ago (Hofmeister et  al. 2021). Alternatively, trigger pathogenic mutations in previously non-pathogenic organisms. The ease of global transportation also dramatically increases the risk of future pandemics (Ord 2020). In addition to these variables, war is a significant factor that results in the spread of pandemic disease, both unintentionally as troops move into foreign lands and intentionally and potentially when used as a weapon (A. T. PriceSmith 2009).

Another often singled but under-recognized future pandemic risk is so-called super bugs, antimicrobial resistant bacteria. Superbugs fall into three categories defined by their susceptibility to antimicrobial agents. Multidrug-resistant pathogens are not susceptible to at least one agent in three or more categories, extensively drug-resistant are not susceptible to at least one agent in all but two or fewer categories, and the most concerning the pandrug-resistant which have no known susceptibility to any antimicrobial agents (Magiorakos et al. 2012).

The potential risk from superbugs is grave. The general director of the WHO described it as being a “fundamental threat to human health, development and security” (Fox 2016). In the USA alone, in 2019 the rate of superbug infections was 2.8 million each year with more than 35,000 deaths (CDC 2019). This rate has likely risen by 15% between 2019 and 2020 (Mishra 2022). Globally the situation is worse. In 2019 an estimated 1.27 million deaths were directly tied to these superbugs, with another 4.95 million associated with such infections. The global burden of these infections is likely higher than HIV or Malaria. Like many other pandemicrelated topics, the global burden of these diseases unequally spread with much higher concentrations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Antimicrobial Resistance Collaborators 2022).

Biomedical researcher Dr. Brian K. Coombes described the severity of the situation, “antibiotics are the foundation on which all modern medicine rests. Cancer chemotherapy, organ transplants, surgeries, and childbirth all rely on antibiotics to prevent infections. If you can’t treat those, then we lose the medical advances we have made in the last 50 years” (Miller 2015).

Even if bio risks, such as pandemics, are not technically defined as a genuine existential threat and are instead understood as a global catastrophic risk, there is a consensus that they should be an issue of global priority (Connell 2017; Palmer et al. 2017). These evaluations of the destructive potential of pandemics focus on it being the direct cause of an existential or global catastrophic threat. The possibility of pandemics following similar pathways as discussed regarding Great Power Conflicts makes a pandemic’s indirect or compounding risk a topic of concern. Global cooperation is needed to address another existential risk a pandemic could hinder. A pandemic could occur alongside another existential threat, such as a Great Power Conflict or runaway global warming overtaxing the systems that might otherwise make us resilient to such a risk.

Peace, Pandemics, and Conflict

Two relationships are essential when considering a PCS perspective on pandemics: (1) What effects do violent conflict have on pandemic diseases? (2) How do pandemics affect violent conflict? The former is currently better understood than the latter. This second relationship reflects an essential priority for the field of Peace Research that will remain so for the foreseeable future. Generally, the relationship between the overall health of a population and peace is well understood. Societies with a higher level of positive peace also tend to be healthier overall. Violent conflicts are also usually correlated with most measures of ill-health (IEP 2022).

Armed conflict between warring states and groups within states has been a significant cause of ill-health and mortality for most of human history. Estimates vary, but it is likely that armed conflict has directly killed somewhere between 100 million and 1 billion lives throughout human history (Roser et al. 2016; Eckhardt 1991). Most estimates do not account for deaths due indirectly to war, so the death toll could be much higher. At the most direct level, large-scale violence results in deaths, with an estimated 90% of causalities being civilians (UNSC 2022). On the topic of disease and conflict, Kaniewski and Marriner (2020) write that “historically, wars disrupted the human-microbe balance, resulting in devastating outbreaks of microbial diseases and high rates of mortality and morbidity all over the world” (2). In addition to the deaths directly due to conflicts, there are also health consequences due to the conflict, what Sartin (1993) refers to as the “third army,” owing to how diseases, directly and indirectly, related to violent conflict often kill as many or more people than die directly on the battlefield. Deaths from these diseases are tied to the movements of troops, the displacement of populations, the breakdown of health and social services, the destruction of safe waste treatment capacity, reductions in food security, and access to clean drinking water (Murray et al. 2002). In low-income countries with a reduced public health capacity, armed conflict exacerbates the effects of diseases, making respiratory infections, diarrheal illnesses, tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV rise into the top ten causes of death. It seems clear that even though more is to be understood, the link between infectious disease and violent conflict is indisputable (Goniewicz et al. 2021; McMichael 2015). Violent conflict has the effect of spreading infectious diseases (Bousquet and Fernandez-Taranco n.d.). Recently an analysis conducted by Mohamed Daw (2021) demonstrated that in Libya, Syria, and Yemen that armed conflict increased the spread of COVID-19 and that this synergistic interaction between the pandemic and violence is likely to be ongoing.

The relationships between violence and disease spread are complex and reciprocal in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with many small-scale attacks against government and health workers in 2019 (Paquette and Sun 2019). These episodes can be understood as a violent backlash resulting from heavy-handed top-down approaches used in communities where there was already long-standing mistrust between local communities during the August–November outbreak of 2014 (Cohn and Kutalek 2016). During the Ebola outbreak from August 2018 to June 2020, there were eruptions of violence and the aura of suspicion and distrust were further exacerbated by rumors that international organizations and the local government were conspiring to intentionally spread the outbreak to sell the dead’s organs (Hayden 2019).

It is also clear that conflicts, particularly large-scale direct violence and prolonged cultural and structural violence, make populations more susceptible to disease and disease transmission. This linkage is due to the destruction of physical infrastructures (food supply lines, access to medicine, sanitation) and political structures (the inability of certain groups to access these physical infrastructures) (Ghobarah et al. 2004). Troops, refugees, and prisoners of war are often “housed” in close quarters with makeshift sanitation promoting rapid spread of contagions. Further violent conflicts contribute to the emergence and proliferation of pathogens in the following ways: increasing population density as individuals flee from conflict areas and into displacement or refugee camps, compromising immune systems through famine, increasing poverty, reducing the effectiveness of public health surveillance systems, and generally creating situations of prolonged physical and psychological stress (A. T. PriceSmith 2009).

The effects of pandemic diseases on the emergence or exacerbation of violent conflicts are less straightforward. New and emerging infectious diseases have already been considered a threat to national security in addition to a threat to global health (National Intelligence Council 2000). Their threat is through directly challenging the state’s power, compromising economic resources, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state, paralyzing institutions, and stoking intrastate violence (A. T. Price-Smith 2009). Beyond understanding pandemics as security threats to the state, PCS needs to develop a more complex and nuanced perspective on how pandemics can drive conflict and peace.

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of understanding the relationships between peace, conflict, and pandemics. The COVID-19 outbreak was declared a public health emergency of international concern on January 30th and a pandemic on March 11th, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020a, 2020b). Less than a month later, the pandemic became a concern for the United Nations. The UN Security General Antonio Guterres delivered remarks to the Security Council regarding the consequences the COVID-19 pandemic could have on global peace and security. Amongst his concerns, Guterres highlighted that the pandemic had already eroded trust in public institutions in many countries. It had resulted in the postponement of elections resulting in political tensions and undermining the legitimacy of governments. He worried that the economic fallout in fragile societies could threaten their stability and resilience. Further, the uncertainty created in the pandemic’s wake could incentivize malicious actors to sow division or provide windows of opportunity for terrorism (Guterres 2020).

Already at this point in the pandemic, it has been clear that COVID-19 revealed the global lack of pandemic preparedness. For many, this came as a shock, given outbreaks of Ebola, H1N1, Zika Avian Flu (H5N1), SARS, and MERS in recent memory. There were earlier warnings from the scientific community about the reservoir of SARS-COVID-type viruses in China (Cheng et al. 2007). The threat of emerging diseases was even a topic of many popular nonfiction best sellers such as Robin Marantz Heing’s (1994) *Dancing Matrix*, Richard Preston’s (1999) *The Hot Zone*, and Laurie Garrett’s books *The Coming Plague* (1995) and *Betrayal of Trust* (2003). Even Wolfgang Petersen’s film *Outbreak* (1995) begins with Nobel laureate Joshua Lederberg’s now haunting line, “The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet is the virus.” Lederberg wrote that though humanity has, through its technology, dominated the plant and animal kingdoms, it is the “microbes that remain our competitors of last resort” (1988, 684). Like the twist ending in H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (1898), when predatory megafauna has been subdued, humanity’s smallest enemies could be their undoing.

In his book *The Causes of War* (Blainey 1988), Geoffrey Blainey writes that wars often start when the belligerents are optimistic. When elites who make decisions are confident and, therefore, willing to take risks, they tend to be less likely to negotiate. Following his logic, peace may best be served by pessimism. Building on this point, Posen (2020) argues that, at least in the short-term, the pessimism and overall contraction resulting from a pandemic may function as a *Pax Epidemica*. According to him, contagious diseases are not conducive to war. Funding is often directed away from the military, and national economies are a primary source of military power. Diseases do not take sides, and soldiers and sailors may be more vulnerable to infection (Posen 2020).

This type of thinking, alongside the general atmosphere of uncertainty, may have led to a temporary downturn in the global level of violent conflicts and military spending shortly after the United Nations Secretary General’s call for a global ceasefire in March 2020. A similar call for the ending of all wars to pool efforts to fight the pandemic was made by the Pope (Bordoni 2020). At this moment in history, there was a fleeting hope for a kind of *Pax Epidemica*, that the common enemy of a global pandemic may be a driving force for peace. There have been past precedents for a large-scale disaster having a positive effect on peacebuilding, such as the influence of the 2004 tsunami in catalyzing the peace agreement in Ache, Indonesia (Berghof Foundation 2020). The UNSG’s call received the backing of more than 180 UN member states, several armed movements, and many civil society organizations (Yazgi et al. 2020).

There were promising signs. Israel and Hamas began negotiating a prisoner swap in April 2020 (Harel 2020). In Yemen, the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen announced a two-week pause in fighting to allow discussions to take steps to a permanent ceasefire (WAM 2020; Chmaytelli 2020). The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) in Colombia called for a 90-day ceasefire to create an environment to restart the peace dialogue (Télam 2020). The Philippines saw dual unilateral ceasefires declared by the New People’s Army and the Government of the Philippines (CPP 2020; Santos 2020). In some cases, armed groups such as the United Wa State Army in Myanmar or drug cartels in Mexico were working to deliver pandemic assistance (Burke 2020; Felbab-Brown 2020). As of July 2022, there were 40 unilateral and 16 bi-/multilateral ceasefires during the COVID-19 pandemic (University of Edinburgh n.d.).

Many hoped the pandemic would serve as a common enemy that would bring forth a common future leading to global cooperation and a more peaceful world. As of 2022, this has not been the case. The opportunity for peace out of the disaster of the pandemic may have been squandered (Brattberg 2020).

Before focusing more on effects directly attributable to the pandemic, an overall picture of the changes during the Global Peace Index (GPI) for 2022 provides an overall picture of the state of peace in 2022. The GPI is calculated by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) and measures 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators from three main domains: (1) ongoing conflicts, (2) safety and security, and (3) militarization. From 2021 to 2022 the IEP found that global peacefulness deteriorated by 0.3%, the 11th year of deterioration over the last 14 years. This timeframe saw a deterioration of 9.3% in the domain of ongoing conflicts and a 3.6% deterioration in safety and security. There was some improvement with decreasing levels of militarization. While it is impossible to delineate which of these effects were causally related to the COVID-19 pandemic, a general inference can be drawn. During this time of the global pandemic, there has been a general increase in the number and intensity of internal and external conflicts fought and the total number of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). One of the most significant changes observed was the number of violent demonstrations, which saw a 50% deterioration, with 77 out of 126 nations recorded as having increased in the total number. Additionally, the economic impact of violence increased by 12.4% from the previous year to $16.5 trillion in purchasing power parity (IEP 2022).

At the outset of the pandemic, it was feared that it would negatively impact peacebuilding efforts. This has primarily turned out to be true. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace conducted a study early in the pandemic into its effects on 12 conflict-affected areas: Afghanistan, Eastern Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Kashmir-India-Pakistan, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. Their preliminary findings were that “the pandemic and efforts to contain it are much more likely to aggravate and multiply conflicts than reducing or end them” (Blanc and Brown 2020). They observed that nation-states and nonstate actors often instrumentalized the pandemic for their own gain. These same observations were found by Sara Polo in a study at the beginning of the pandemic using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Data Project (ACELD) (Polo 2020). The pandemic also tested the legitimacy of all actors claiming authority. It tended to compound existing economic, health, and conflict problems. The pandemic also caused a widespread reorganization of peace processes (Blanc and Brown 2020).

The pandemic has also contributed to conflict by exacerbating many of the underlying root causes (Polo 2020). It has accelerated deep-seated socioeconomic inequality, thus increasing the risk of conflict worldwide (Blattman and Miguel 2010; Cederman et al. 2011). The impact pandemics have on social and economic inequality is essential to consider when understanding the relationships between pandemics and conflict. Poverty and inequality are principal variables in the spread of pathogens (Farmer 2003). Further, both are also factors that can exacerbate violent conflict. In his book *The Great Leveller* (2017), Walter Scheidel argued that events such as wars and pandemics generally have a leveling effect on economic inequality. In his observations, social-economic systems generally unequally distribute wealth. Because it is often advantageous to those in power to keep the status quo, the system reaches a kind of homeostasis. It is a function of complex systems in balance to be resistant to change. A large-scale and sustained shock to the system allows systems to be reorganized. He argued that this had been the historical trend; economic inequality is reduced following a pandemic.

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, this historic observation does not seem to hold. The pandemic has made evident and further exacerbated the levels and scope of socioeconomic inequality. Though measuring inequality within and between countries at the global level is complex, the pandemic is still far from over, and the data is not fully available. However, it does seem that generally speaking, social, political, and economic inequality has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (IMF 2021; Stiglitz 2020; UNDP 2020; Goldin and Muggah 2020).

The negative impacts are more acutely felt by those at lower socioeconomic levels and less by those who are more affluent. Generally, the death rates are greater among minorities and the poor compared to those who can afford health care and whose living and working circumstances make them less likely to contract COVID-19. Similarly, the effects of unemployment resulting from the pandemic have been spread unevenly across societies, significantly affecting the poor, working class, and marginalized (Stiglitz 2022).

At the outset of the pandemic, there were well-founded fears that uncertainty and economic contractions in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries would have a knock-down effect of decreasing global investment in overseas aid and international peacekeeping efforts (IEP 2020). Luckily, this was not the case, with OECD spending rising to record levels in 2020 and 2021 (OECD 2022).

In their first update to their textbook *Peace and Conflict Studies* (2022) since the COVID-19 pandemic began, David Barash and Charles Webel wrote,

This pandemic made it clear that we are not all in the same boat: The rich and powerful continue, for the most part, to sail through these heavy seas on their yachts (sometimes literally) while the rest of humanity had to paddle their rowboats through a superstorm. (926)

The economist Joseph Stiglitz confirms this observation. He writes that the pandemic’s most significant impact “will be a worsening of inequality, both within the U.S. and between developed and developing countries” (Stiglitz 2022). The world’s billionaires got about $1.9 trillion richer in 2020 and $1.6 trillion richer in 2021 (Peterson-Withorn 2020). The trend seems likely to continue. At the same time, it is estimated that 75–95 million more people than pre-pandemic projections are likely to be living in extreme poverty by the end of 2022 (Mahler et al. 2022). This increase in extreme poverty has a corresponding effect on acute food insecurity, putting millions of children at risk of famine, and placing additional pressure on social and health systems already at their limits (UNICEF 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many long-standing shadow problems into the light. On the material level, food security has been a long-standing concern in many countries and regions worldwide (FAO 2019). The pandemic has already had dramatic effects on food insecurity (McDermott and Swinnen 2022), which is being further exacerbated by the 2022 war in Ukraine (WFP 2022). Tensions and long-standing sanctions on countries like Iran and Cuba have hindered the pandemic response (IEP 2020). The neoliberal structures in the geopolitical system compounded by the pandemic have resulted in many countries with poor credit being unable to borrow or repay debt, likely leading to increases in poverty, political instability, and violence. All of which can be further compounding factors for conflict and contributors to existential risks.

The pandemic has also exposed structural and cultural violence systems, bringing many long-standing sociopolitical issues to the surface, revealing fault lines, prejudices, and discrimination that have been made worse through the pandemic and made visible. The scapegoating of minorities and pandemics have gone hand in hand throughout history (Nelkin and Gilman 1988). Studies of past and present epidemics have shown that this mixture makes social conflicts more likely (Jedwab et al. 2021). Already at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, these relationships were evident. In the USA, the news was full of stories of people of Asian descent being intimidated, attacked, and scapegoated for having “caused” the pandemic (Tavernise and Oppel Jr 2020; Abdulllah and Hughes 2021; NPR 2021). Anti-Chinese sentiments and discrimination against Asian peoples grew across Africa (DW 2020; Solomon 2020). At the same time, in China, people of African origin were forcibly tested, evicted, and quarantined (Vincent 2020; Al Jazeera 2020). In the Gulf countries, there was an increase in xenophobia against people from Asia living and working in countries like Kuwait and Bahrain (Migrant Rights 2020).

What is perhaps unique about pandemics as a global catastrophic risk are their effects on humanity’s ability to work together. As Yuval Noah Harari argues, people’s ability to collaborate is one of the fundamental reasons we have survived and thrived as a species (2015, 2018). Social distancing, quarantines, and lockdown brought forth the challenge of working together and developing a sense of community when the very act of being physically together could be a hazard. This, it seems, will prove to be an essential lesson for the future. Coordination and collaboration are critical elements in responding to a pandemic and are essential for addressing most, if not all, existential risks. This ability becomes a concern when considering the nexus of infectious disease, existential risks, and conflict. Similar to the dynamics discussed in the chapter on Great Powers Conflicts, international trust and cooperation tend to fall as tensions rise and are further diminished through conflicts. From the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to imagine how responses to pandemics can be hindered through the collapse of trust. In situations of high uncertainty and fear, mistrust of government officials can be extended to health and aid workers. At the same time, governments can become reluctant to provide aid to populations affected by ongoing conflicts. These dynamics can make it difficult for vulnerable populations to receive assistance during a pandemic. Authoritarian governments can also use the opportunities presented by a pandemic to use the closure of borders, the adaptation of high-tech surveillance systems, and new legal frames to restrict collaboration they see as threatening to their power (Burke 2020).

#### Resilient ports mitigate trade disruptions.

Dr. Giulia Brancaccio et al. 25, PhD, Assistant Professor, Stern School of Business, New York University. Research Fellow, Business, NBER. Research Affiliate, CEPR; Dr. Myrto Kalouptsidi, PhD, Professor, International Economics, Harvard University; Dr. Theodore Papageorgiou, PhD, Professor, Economics, Boston College, "Investment in Infrastructure and Trade: The Case of Ports," NBER, Working Paper No. 32503, October 2025, pg. 2-65.

Transportation infrastructure is vital for the smooth functioning of international trade. Ports are a crucial gateway to this system: with more than 80% of trade carried by ships, they shape trade costs, and it is critical that they operate efficiently. Yet ports are susceptible to disruptions, causing costly delays. With enormous budgets spent on infrastructure to alleviate these costs, a key policy question emerges: in a world with high volatility, what are the returns to investing in infrastructure? To address this question, we introduce an empirical framework that combines insights from queueing theory to capture port technology, with tools from demand estimation. We use our framework, together with a collection of novel datasets, to quantify the costs of disruptions and evaluate transportation infrastructure investment. Our analysis unveils four policy-relevant messages: (i) investing in port infrastructure can lead to substantial trade and welfare gains, but only if targeted properly– in fact, net of costs, the marginal return to investment is positive at a minority of US ports; (ii) there are sizable spillovers across ports, as investing in one port can decongest a wider set of ports, suggesting that decision-making should not be decentralized to local authorities; (iii) the economies of scale arising from queuing would lead a planner to concentrate investment in large, geographically dispersed megaports; (iv) macroeconomic volatility can drastically change returns to investment.

#### That caps a plethora of existential risks AND averts nuclear war.

Sean Sturm & Dr. Michael A. Peters 24, MA, International Relations, International Islamic of University Islamabad; PhD, Professor, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University. Emeritus Professor, University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign, "The Emerging International Order: Debating Polarity in Global Politics," PESA Agora, 2024, https://pesaagora.com/columns/the-emerging-international-order-debating-polarity-in-global-politics/. [language edited; initials inserted for clarity]

SS: 5: What factors do you believe contribute most significantly to shaping the existing polar structure of global politics?

MP: The existing polar structure of global politics is shaped by a complex interplay of various factors. While it is difficult to pinpoint a single factor, several contribute significantly to the current international landscape. The rise of new global powers and the relative decline of traditional ones have led to shifts in the balance of power. The competition between the United States and China, as well as other power dynamics such as the European Union, Russia and India, has created a multipolar world where strategic interests often clash. The global economy is interconnected but also marked by fierce competition. Economic interdependence can lead to cooperation but also to conflict as countries vie for markets, resources and investment opportunities. Trade wars and protectionism can exacerbate these tensions. The spread of different political ideologies, such as liberal democracy and authoritarianism, can lead to ideological clashes. The promotion of certain values by one country can be seen as a threat by another, leading to political polarisation. The rapid development of technology, especially in areas like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and communication, has created new frontiers for international competition and cooperation. Countries often view technological superiority as a key factor in maintaining or gaining geopolitical advantage. The finite nature of resources and the growing threat of climate change can lead to competition, especially in regions where access to resources is critical. Environmental degradation can also create shared challenges that require international collaboration, often amidst differing priorities and levels of commitment. The rise of populist and nationalist movements in many countries has led to a shift towards more inward-looking policies, prioritising national sovereignty and interests over international cooperation. This can lead to a more confrontational approach to global politics. Terrorism, weapons proliferation and transnational crime pose security challenges that require international responses. However, differences in approach and priorities can lead to disagreements and even conflicts among states. The role and effectiveness of international organisations and the norms they promote can influence global politics. The perception of whether these institutions are fair and representative can lead to either cooperation or pushback, contributing to polarisation. Population movements, whether due to conflict, economic opportunity, or environmental factors, can create challenges for recipient and source countries, leading to policy responses that can increase international tensions. The ability to control and influence information flows, as well as the rise of disinformation and fake news, can manipulate public opinion and political discourse, contributing to polarisation and distrust among nations. All these factors are interconnected and often feed into each other, creating a dynamic and often volatile international environment. The polar structure of global politics is a reflection of these complex interactions, where the actions of one country can have far-reaching effects on the international system.

Greater attention needs to be paid to the international finance system, which is based on the US dollar dominance. After Bretton Woods and the settling up of WB and IMF, the gold standard faltered to be replaced with the dollar system which gives the US huge advantages. The global financial crisis, which reached its peak in 2008, exposed significant weaknesses in the international financial system, including the role of the US dollar as the world’s primary reserve currency. Prior to the crisis, the US dollar enjoyed a dominant position in global finance. It was not only the primary currency for international trade but also the major reserve currency held by central banks. This meant that many countries needed dollars to conduct trade and finance their balance of payments. The crisis raised questions about the trustworthiness and stability of the US financial system, which had been considered one of the safest and most reliable in the world. The collapse of major financial institutions like Lehman Brothers and the government’s rescue of others like AIG called this perception into question. As the crisis unfolded, trade and investment flows were disrupted. Global trade volume contracted sharply, and cross-border lending dried up. Since trade is often denominated in dollars, the stability of the dollar was crucial for the recovery of global trade. The Federal Reserve’s response to the crisis, particularly the implementation of quantitative easing (QE), was unprecedented. By purchasing large quantities of financial assets, the Fed aimed to lower interest rates and encourage lending and investment. While this was necessary to stabilise the US economy, it also raised concerns about the dollar’s value and long-term inflation prospects. The crisis led to a significant fall in commodity prices, including oil, which is priced in dollars. This deflationary trend put downward pressure on the dollar’s value against other currencies as investors sought shelter in perceived safe havens like the Swiss Franc or gold. The crisis prompted a reevaluation of the global financial architecture. There was increased discussion about the need for a more diversified reserve currency system, less dependent on the dollar. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international financial institutions have been pressured to consider the role of other currencies, such as the euro or renminbi, in the global reserve system. Over time, the US economy recovered, and the dollar has remained the dominant reserve currency. However, the crisis did lead to a partial decentralisation of financial markets and a shift in liquidity provision, with central banks around the world playing a more active role in managing their domestic economies. The crisis also contributed to the rise of non-bank financial institutions, such as money market funds and shadow banks, which play a significant role in the financial system but are less regulated than traditional banks. This has raised concerns about financial stability in the long term. Although the US dollar’s role in the international financial system has remained robust, the global financial crisis did expose vulnerabilities and prompt a reevaluation of the system’s reliance on the dollar. This has led to a more nuanced approach to global financial governance, with a gradual shift towards a more balanced and diversified international monetary system and the increasing practice of BRICS countries trading in local currencies.

The shape of the existing polar structure of global politics must be understood in terms of the long-term shift from the end of the age of colonisation and the rise of independent states especially populous countries like India and China that have large populations and also domestic markets. Colonisation and globalisation are the twin long-term processes that have been responsible for the existing structure of global politics, sometimes referred to in the grossly simplified notion of Global South and Global North, or even South-South relations. I think here we need a theory of capitalism that embraces both historical phases and interprets the decline of the West – the colonisers – with the rise of the East – the colonised. After the end of the colonial era – the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s – globalisation, while a source of inequalities both within and between countries, also enabled China and other countries more recently to lift large sections of the population out of poverty. Globalisation allowed a form of export open trade to enable competition and, while not equal, provided the basis for development with BRICS countries but not all. Many suffer from excessive IMF debt loading and from little debt relief even though the population is at starving point (e.g., Sri Lanka). Globalisation allowed a foot in the door, and, during the first modern waves, it provided a means for some countries to step aside from general poverty. Now many developing countries are riding the latest wave – India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Uzbekistan. At a certain level investment in education becomes a critical variable, not only universal but also university education, especially in the STEM subjects that lead to digital benefits of larger-scale global markets. Now that AI comprises the latest unicorn investment strategy, with billions invested in the last year we are facing the AI race focus on bots and the US’s active strategic control of the chip supply line to slow China’s development. This is an added complication for Taiwan as the TSMC company makes 90% of the most advanced chips contributing to the Taiwan question of reunification with China. Nvidia’s Blackwell superchip is a game changer, especially with twinning, which is changing the future of industrial capacity coming online.

SS: 6: What are the potential consequences of maintaining or attempting to shift the existing polar structure of global politics?

MP: Maintaining or attempting to shift the existing polar structure of global politics can have a range of potential consequences, both intended and unintended, which can affect global stability, economic growth and the lives of ordinary people. A polar structure can lead to heightened tensions and competition between major powers, potentially escalating into proxy conflicts or direct confrontations. This can increase the risk of military conflicts and nuclear brink~~man~~ship, endangering global security. The current structure may lead to a decline in multilateralism and the weakening of international institutions, making it harder to address global challenges such as climate change, pandemics and international security threats through collective action. The polar structure can result in economic blocs and trade barriers, leading to economic fragmentation and reducing global trade and investment flows. This can hinder economic growth and development, especially for smaller and less powerful countries. As major powers compete in technology and strategic capabilities, there is a risk of technological arms races and the development of new weapons systems that could increase the risk of accidental escalation and the spread of nuclear weapons. The promotion of different ideological systems can lead to polarisation and a lack of dialogue between countries, making it difficult to find common ground on issues of mutual concern. The polar structure can influence social and cultural dynamics, leading to the spread of nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments. This can negatively impact migrant and minority communities and lead to social divisions within countries. Developing countries can find themselves caught between major power rivalries, making it harder for them to determine their own political and economic futures. They may also face reduced assistance and increased conditionalities from major powers. The polar structure may hinder global cooperation on environmental issues, leading to a lack of effective action on climate change and other environmental challenges that require collective effort. The structure can impede effective global health responses to pandemics and other health crises, as national interests may be prioritised over a collective approach to health security. Countries may engage in diplomatic and soft power battles to shape international norms and narratives, which can lead to a more nuanced and subtle form of competition that still has significant implications for global politics. The consequences of maintaining or shifting the polar structure of global politics are not deterministic and can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including the actions of individual countries, international events and the emergence of new global issues. Efforts to address these consequences and promote a more cooperative and stable international order are ongoing, involving diplomatic negotiations, international cooperation and the development of new norms and institutions. Many countries walk the line between not offending the US and trading with China, like NZ as a traditional ally, but diplomacy has limits, and regional conflicts are likely to persist at the margins, especially for those states like Myanmar and Tajikistan that are not well integrated into either the global market economy or regional security networks. We will have to remember that the US has approximately 750 bases worldwide and an annual military budget of nearly $800 billion. While AI, satellite surveillance and drone warfare are changing the shape of modern conflict, the notion of control of territories still has a dominant place in geopolitics, and, ultimately, it is an international system that is backed by military force, whether it be border protection, control of the sea, peacekeeping or enforcement of sanctions.

#### The pacifying effect of trade is robust.

Johan Norberg 22, MA, Senior Fellow, Cato Institute, "Free Trade Still Promotes Peace, Despite Putin’s Reckless War," Cato Institute, 04/29/2022, https://www.cato.org/commentary/free-trade-still-promotes-peace-despite-putins-reckless-war. [italics in original]

We are in the longest stretch of peace between major powers for 1,800 years, the old archenemies France and Germany almost cozy up too much to one another, and Putin’s invasion is the first attempt to launch a major war of conquest since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. In a world where peace used to be just a brief interlude while everybody rearmed, something has gone right in the post–World War II era. If you want the whole story, read Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, but clearly doux commerce has something to do with it.

Proximity and interdependence are not always deterrents, especially if different groups share one pool of resources that they all want the largest share of. Additionally, not all cultures and communities are happily harmonious, and civil wars are often the most vicious. However, the general relationship between trade and peace is a strong one.

By analyzing thousands of country pairs over several decades, many researchers have found that increasing trade between two countries lowers the risk of war between them. They have also found that countries that are more dependent on international trade have fewer conflicts than self-reliant ones, which provides us all with a security interest in other countries’ global integration as well.

It’s not just trade though; it’s free trade. A series of statistical analyses by the political scientist Patrick McDonald show that the level of free trade between two countries has a larger effect on peace. Countries that engage in free trade are less likely to attack or be attacked than protectionist countries. Free trade removes the barriers and privileges that enhance the domestic power of groups that generally support authoritarian leaders and an aggressive foreign policy.

It has long been known that democracies are more peaceful. According to McDonald’s study, the risk of a war between two countries is reduced by almost 30 percent if they move from little democracy to the highest level of democracy. But in fact, liberal, capitalist peace is even more powerful than democratic peace. If two countries move to the highest level of free trade, the risk of war is reduced by as much as 70 percent. Forget about the golden arches, this is the real McDonald’s theory of peace.

In an era of decoupling and trade wars, there are other authoritarian powers, like China, worth worrying about. It’s not just current trade relations that inform decisions over war and peace but also expectations of future relations. The historical pattern is that countries that expect the international order will stay open mostly prefer to be at peace with it, to reap the rewards, but when they feel that it is closing time, they start fearing the loss of access to resources and markets. Some even go to war to secure them.

If authoritarians lose all commercial, cultural, and personal relationships with the outside world, they have nothing left to lose. They are suddenly free to act according to their own character. And that is scary.

If goods cross borders, it might not always stop soldiers from doing so. But if goods suddenly stop moving across borders, history suggests that soldiers won’t be far behind.

#### Failed disaster response ensures extinction.

Jeff Schlegelmilch 24, MPH, MBA, Research Scholar and Director, Disaster Preparedness, Columbia Climate School at Columbia University, "'The Big One' Disaster Could Happen in Our Lifetime. Can We Even Be Ready?" CNN, 07/19/2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/14/opinions/big-one-disaster-in-our-lifetime-megadisaster-preparedness-schlegelmilch/index.html.

There are also mega threats beyond “the big one” quake feared along a ruptured fault or a waking “very high threat” volcano. As explained in detail in my book, “Rethinking Readiness: A Brief Guide to Twenty-First-Century Megadisasters,” there are categories of calamities with the potential to become megadisasters including biothreats, extreme weather related to climate change, infrastructure failure such as a power grid going down, cyberthreats and nuclear conflict. In each of these scenarios, our development of societies enhances the threats and our underlying vulnerability to them.

Biothreats, including the possibility of a pandemic that would dwarf the Covid-19 pandemic, stalk us with pathogens such as highly pathogenic avian influenza lurking in the background. The prospect of biological weapons reads like something out of a science-fiction novel, but these are real threats: Advances in genetic engineering are lowering the technical barriers to build sophisticated bioweapons, with potentially devastating consequences.

Unprecedented heat and extreme-weather events are breaking records and have cost trillions of dollars in the past few decades in the US alone. This has all been bought and paid for with our disaster funds, national deficit, and absorbed by our large economy. But there are breaking points. Deficits are growing, and spending on disasters is increasingly coming into question with projections of costs set to continue to spiral without reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. These hazards are also threatening to make some parts of the world, such as the Middle East, virtually uninhabitable without extreme reliance on cooling infrastructure. Some small island nations may vanish entirely because of sea-level rise. The implications for state stability, global migration and military assets pose such a risk to national security that the Defense Department and other agency leaders have been increasingly sounding the alarm on climate change.

Our vulnerability from crumbling infrastructure and potentially “catastrophic” cyber threats continues to be front and center in the news, with a ship crashing into Baltimore’s Key Bridge, leading to its subsequent collapse, giving us just a small taste of what is possible when our critical arteries and systems go down. And, of course, with Russia’s war in Ukraine, among other global tinderboxes involving nuclear powers, nuclear war is now arguably more likely than it was during the Cold War.

A megadisaster could strike a catastrophic blow at the outset or could cause widespread death and destruction through a slow burn of cascading impacts such as a nuclear winter from atomic blasts, or prolonged droughts leading to crop failures, mass famines and the collapse of governments.

While emergency managers around the world already have their hands full with disasters of increasing scope, severity and frequency, megadisasters could overtake the very systems we rely upon to manage disasters.

The limits of emergency management

A friend and respected colleague in the field once referred to disasters as a “numbers game”: You have to garner limited resources across relatively siloed organizations, within and outside of government, and get them to work together to help response and recovery in the greatest way possible — getting things like water, food, medicine, fuel and temporary shelters where they are needed most.

The practice of emergency management has generally originated from the first responder community and the civil defense era, primarily with a focus on consequence management. Early disaster researchers like Enrico Quarantelli found disasters to be whole-of-society phenomena, where everyone comes together and recovery works — or they don’t, and it doesn’t. But as emergency management agencies have been designed, emergency management systems have been shaped by laws and agreements across government bureaucracies and partners in the private and nonprofit sectors with a narrower focus on managing consequences, focused more on logistics than sociology.

Over the past several decades, the aperture of the emergency manager has widened to take a broader look beyond the procedures. In the United States, this has been encapsulated with a transition from talking about “preparedness” to words like “resilience.” The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) now speaks of a whole community approach to disasters, and even includes community lifelines as a key lens for understanding recovery and resilience. These approaches look at how society works, across multiple independent businesses, organizations and agencies and what is needed to make recovery happen — such as delivering transportation, communications, safety and security, food, water and shelter.

#### Independently, weak administration fuels domestic terrorism.

Timothy Snyder 25, DPhil, Professor Emeritus, History, University of Toronto. Inaugural Chair, Modern European History, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto. Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences, "The Next Terrorist Attack," Snyder Substack, 11/01/2025, https://snyder.substack.com/p/the-next-terrorist-attack-26b. [italics in original]

Terrorism is a real risk in the real world. The constant use of the word to denote unreal threats creates unreality. And unreality inside key institutions degrades capability. Security agencies that have been trained to follow political instructions about imaginary threats do not investigate actual threats. Fiction is dangerous. Treating the administration’s abduction of a legal permanent resident as a heroic defense against terror is not only mendacious and unconstitutional but also dangerous.

This administration makes the United States *look* vulnerable. Americans under the spell of Trump’s charisma might imagine that strength is being projected. Not so. To prospective terrorists we look erratic and weak. Even apparently unrelated policies — such as enabling foreign disinformation, gutting environmental protection, undoing weather forecasting, ending food inspections, and undermining disease control — make life easier for terrorists and open avenues of attack. By taking apart the government, crashing the economy, and dividing the population, Musk and Trump invite attention of the worst sort, from people who wish to hurt Americans.

Who are such people? Three possible groups of perpetrators of a major terrorist attack in the United States are native right-wing nationalists or white supremacists (“domestic violent extremists”), Islamicists, and Russians.

Most terrorism in the United States is domestic, and most of the domestic terror comes from the far right. We have recently seen a series of white supremacist killings. Cody Balmer, who wanted to kill Pennsylvania’s (Democratic, Jewish) governor, wrote that “Biden supporters should not exist.”

It might seem counter-intuitive that the far right would carry out acts of terror under Trump, but this is already the norm, and there are good reasons to expect worse. The most lethal domestic terror attack in US history, McVeigh’s bombing, was directed against federal workers. Right-wing terrorists might believe that terror is what Trump wants. The suspect in the Florida mass shooting “advocated for President Donald Trump's agenda and often promoted white supremacist values,” according to someone who saw him regularly. Trump has long practiced stochastic violence. His pardon of the January 6th criminals encourages terror with the promise of forgiveness. Patel promoted a recording of the January 6 criminals singing the national anthem. This coddling culture of martryrdom makes more killing more likely.

There is also another scenario. Far right movements can divide, with the more impatient angry with those they see as compromised. This is a lesson from the history of fascism. Some supporters of Trump will be disappointed with him. The assassination attempt on Trump was carried out by someone whose social media posts conveyed hatred of Jews and immigrants. Bongino now has to contend with fans of his show who think that the January 6th criminals should be running the FBI.

#### That enables nuclear terrorism AND civil war.

Sneha Nair et al. 23, MA, Former Research Analyst, Nuclear Security, Stimson Center; Anna Pluff, MA, Former Junior Fellow, Proliferation Prevention, Stimson Center; Christina McAllister, MA, Senior Fellow and Director, Nuclear Security, Stimson Center, "The Threat from Within: An Overview of the Domestic Violent Extremist Threat Facing US Nuclear Security Practitioners," Stimson Center, 11/02/2023, https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-threat-from-within-an-overview-of-the-domestic-violent-extremist-threat-facing-us-nuclear-security-practitioners/.

In May 2021, Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas identified the greatest domestic threat facing the United States as “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists,” specifically, white supremacists.10 White supremacist extremists pose the primary threat among all domestic violent extremists. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) provided data showing that white supremacists were responsible for 51 out of 169 domestic terrorist attacks and plots from 2010 through 2021, the highest number among domestic terrorist ideologies.11 In October 2022, the FBI and DHS issued a report titled “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism,” which put forth the most significant threat facing the U.S. as being posed by “lone offenders and small groups of individuals who commit acts of violence motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances.”12 The report also contended that of these actors, “domestic violent extremists represent one of the most persistent threats to the United States today.”13

The January 6th Capitol riot compelled the Biden Administration to prioritize the issue of domestic extremism. FBI Director Chris Wray condemned the January insurrection as “domestic terrorism” and described in stark terms the threat domestic violent extremists posed to the United States.14 While not every individual involved in the attack was part of a militia or right-wing group, many shared common beliefs.

DVE, Accelerationism, and Critical Nuclear Infrastructure

Domestic violent extremism (DVE) is an all-encompassing category that includes a variety of ideologies, including anti-government extremists, anarchists, anti-abortion extremists, white supremacists, involuntary celibates, ecoterrorists, and a smattering of other assorted extremists from across the political spectrum.15 While DVE represents a range of threats, the interest in nuclear terrorism by accelerationist white nationalist groups represents a particular security concern for the nuclear policy community.

Critical Infrastructure

One commonly shared feature of DVE adherents is the focus on attacking critical infrastructure – including nuclear power plants. Attacks on U.S. energy infrastructure are increasing.16 Recent incidents on infrastructure include six “intrusion events” at Florida substations in September 2022; six attacks on substations in the US Northwest in November and December of 2022; four substations vandalized in Washington State cutting power to 14,000 on Christmas Day, 2022; and a December 2022 North Carolina “targeted attack that left thousands without power.”17 Attackers often seek to attack regional power substations in order to cause economic distress and civil unrest. Leftist, anti-statist, accelerationist groups have also emerged on Telegram, to espouse their views that the U.S. electrical grid must be systematically attacked and dismantled. Telegram has attempted to remove much of the content but has been ineffective at regulating its content to filter extremist messaging.18 As laid out in detail in the Case Studies section below, white supremacists Brandon Russell and Sarah Clendaniel were arrested in February 2023, on federal charges of plotting to shoot up a ring of subpower stations in Baltimore. The intent was to “destroy” Baltimore, a majority Black city.19 Greg Harman writes that the “arrest reflects a sustained mobilization of homegrown neo-Nazi networks, whose members are seeking to disrupt the nation’s power supply in hopes of ushering in economic collapse and race war.”20

DVE and insider threats thus represent a particular area of concern for nuclear security, as evidenced by the Institute of Nuclear Management’s (INMM) exploration of the intersection of homegrown violent extremism and the security of nuclear facilities at its 63rd Annual Meeting. Indeed, prior to targeting the Baltimore grid, Brandon Russell had expressed interest in taking out a Florida nuclear plant.21 Russell’s case is not an outlier. Other domestic violent extremist actors have illustrated the vulnerabilities in how security practitioners identify threats to nuclear security across the ideological spectrum – from other far-right actors like Matthew Gebert and Ashli Babbitt in recent years, to the jihadist radicalization of Sharif Mobley following the 9/11 attacks. The Case Studies section of this paper presents more detail on each of these cases.

Accelerationism

Accelerationist ideology, which holds that the modern, Western democratic state is so mired in corruption and ineptitude that true patriots should instigate a violent insurrection, ultimately allowing a new, white-dominated order to emerge, presents additional concerns for the nuclear security community as some groups advocate for the use of nuclear weapons to achieve the new order.22 Accelerationist dogma is often adopted by adherents who subscribe to an ‘alternative history,’ one that usually serves as a foil to the increasing racial diversity of American society. Accelerationists have created a historical narrative that utilizes stock footage, still images, and classical literature to assemble a romanticized image of an American past that valued whiteness, marriage, family values, and religiosity to claim that these values are in decline and to recruit membership from involuntary celibates (incels) and young, white men who wish to return to a manufactured past.23

One accelerationist group that caught the attention of the nuclear community is the Atomwaffen Division (AWD). AWD was organized as a series of terror cells advocating for the use of nuclear weapons to yield the collapse of civilization. Unlike some other white power activists, accelerationists believe modernity “has reached such a level of degeneracy and corruption that it cannot be rescued through mass movements or other political means.24” Many of the most violent manifestations of domestic violent extremism in the U.S. are encouraged by “mobilizing concepts.9” Mobilizing concepts are different from traditional ideological frameworks, which are rooted in more clearly articulated beliefs or theories about how political or economic systems should work (anarchism, communism, fascism, etc.). An understanding of these neo-fascist accelerationist groups as a fluid network with broader goals of social destruction, rather than individual units with distinct ideological perspectives helps understand the continued relevance of AWD and its mission even after its dormancy in 2017.25 The effectiveness of these mobilizing concepts and the fluid nature of the ideological network can be seen in how AWD has inspired similar neo-fascist accelerationist groups such as The Base, which unlike AWD, has tried to veil its desire to spark a “nuclear civil war” behind claims that it is focused on maintaining a “survivalism and self-defense network” in an effort to recruit broader membership.26

Another offshoot of the now-defunct neo-Nazi terror group Atomwaffen Division recently undertook a propaganda push to capitalize on the December 2022 power grid attack in Moore County, which resulted in widespread power outages affecting 40,000 customers.27 The morning after the attack, neo-Nazi accelerationists on a private Telegram channel began to speculate about the involvement of the National Socialist Resistance Front (NSRF).28 NSRF represents another rotating face of a network of neo-fascist groups that seek to use terror to promote their ideological goals of a new white-led order. In weeks leading up to the Moore County power grid attack, members of Uncle Ted’s Cabin channel distributed multiple terror manuals that encourage mass shootings and industrial sabotage.29

While not all accelerationist or DVE groups have nuclear ambitions, examining AWD and its ability to influence other extremist groups provides a clearer understanding of the threat landscape. Insights into membership mobility can inform preventative actions by governments and emphasize the importance of examining the ties between accelerationist groups, to ensure that DVE groups remain unable to acquire nuclear materials, weapons, technology, or information that would advance their cause.

#### Nuclear terrorism is existential.

Dr. Michael M. Andregg 22, PhD, Vice-President, International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, "The Developing Global Crisis and Survival of Human Civilizations," Comparative Civilizations Review, Vol. 86, No. 86, Spring 2022, pg. 59-60.

Cutting through many details, a general thermonuclear war would probably destroy all of human civilization. MAD theory says that this should convince every leader on earth never to use such weapons because they assure destruction of nearly everyone. But theories of war that rely on human behavior and historic experience, rather than on sterile abstractions created by people to justify massive expenditures on exotic new weapons, are less optimistic. What is the exact probability that a general nuclear war will be triggered by some madman in some country, by accident,87 or by some clever attack by terrorists who acquire a few nuclear warheads by any method? No one knows or can know that theoretical number. But we can calculate the half-life of human civilization for any such probability using Poisson statistics.88

So, simply put as always, if the probability of a general nuclear war is 1% (one percent) per year, the half-life of our civilization would be about 69 years. If global civilization avoids that dark fate for 69 years, but retains the hardware, weapons, doctrines, and mindset of MAD, then the danger continues according to the same arithmetic. The combined probability of the rare event occurring (in this case a general nuclear war) asymptotes to .9999 (near certainty) very quickly on the time scale of civilizations. The practical result of such calculations is to recognize that humankind does not have forever to solve the “Developing Global Crisis” which already generates tens of millions of desperate young men every year with very stark economic futures. People who have nothing to lose and plenty to envy can be remarkably dangerous even with primitive weapons. Dominant powers call them terrorists, but they call themselves freedom fighters for oppressed peoples. And some of them spend every day trying to build or acquire the same weapons that dominant powers now use to sustain their dominance of global affairs.

Elsewhere many people have described hundreds of scenarios where this might occur.89 So, I will illustrate it with a single example here. Suppose that a well-financed terrorist group like ISIS managed to purchase just a few modern nuclear warheads, from say Pakistan that is sympathetic to many goals of militant Islamic groups. Smuggling heavy items is remarkably easy in our fractured world; ask any drug cartel. Suppose these “terrorists” choose to use the same tactics that dominant powers use, attacking enemies that bomb them every year.

Imagine one warhead in Washington D.C., one in Moscow, and one in Tel Aviv Israel, set to detonate simultaneously. Is anyone sure none of those nuclear powers would retaliate against targets they suspect? When the US wargames such nuclear scenarios, most of them escalate quickly to general nuclear war due to the exigencies of attack and uncertainties of the “fog of war” when capitols disappear in radioactive fire. Recognizing this basic instability of the MAD doctrine, four of the architects of America’s nuclear deterrence system called for the elimination of all nuclear weapons worldwide.90 They too have been ignored by a system that continues due to economic momentum among vested interests as much as for any strategic security reasons.

#### Civil war spills over AND goes nuclear. Expert consensus disproves checks.

SLG 12-20, Citing: Preventive Priorities Survey 2026 by the Council on Foreign Relations. Survey Author: Dr. Paul B. Stares, PhD, MA, General John W. Vessey Senior Fellow, Conflict Prevention, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations. Director, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations. Former Vice President & Director Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, United States Institute of Peace, "The Next Wars," SL Guardian, 12/20/2025, https://slguardian.org/the-next-wars/.

The international security environment entering 2026 is marked by an intensity, breadth, and complexity of conflict risks unseen since the end of the Second World War. According to the Center for Preventive Action’s Preventive Priorities Survey 2026, the number of armed conflicts worldwide has reached its highest level in decades, with interstate wars once again becoming more common after a long post–Cold War period dominated by internal conflicts. The survey, now in its eighteenth year, reflects the judgment of approximately 620 American foreign policy experts drawn from government, academia, and the policy community, who assessed thirty discrete contingencies judged plausible within the coming twelve months. Their collective assessment underscores a sobering reality: global anxiety about violent conflict remains undiminished, and U.S. policymakers face an increasingly crowded and volatile risk landscape.

One of the most striking findings of the 2026 survey is the persistence of high-likelihood, high-impact contingencies. Five scenarios fall into this most dangerous category, indicating both a strong probability of occurrence and a direct threat to U.S. national interests that could trigger military involvement. Among these, the war between Russia and Ukraine continues to rank as a top concern. Experts warn that the conflict is likely to intensify further in 2026 through expanded attacks on critical infrastructure and civilian population centers on both sides. This evolution reflects the war’s transition from maneuver warfare to a grinding conflict of attrition, with increasingly severe humanitarian consequences and growing risks of escalation involving NATO.

The Middle East occupies a disproportionately prominent place in the highest-risk tier. Renewed fighting in the Gaza Strip is judged to be both highly likely and highly consequential, driven by escalating clashes between Hamas militants and Israeli security forces. The survey highlights that such renewed conflict would deepen an already dire humanitarian crisis and exacerbate instability across the region. Closely related is the situation in the West Bank, where increased violence between Israeli forces and Palestinians is considered highly likely amid ongoing settlement expansion, disputes over political rights, and the spillover effects of the Gaza war. Together, Gaza and the West Bank exemplify how localized confrontations can have regional and global implications, particularly given U.S. strategic commitments to Israel and broader Middle Eastern stability.

Beyond the immediate Israeli-Palestinian theater, experts also assign high priority to the risk of renewed armed conflict between Iran and Israel. Although assessed as moderately likely rather than highly probable, the potential impact of such a conflict is considered severe. Concerns center on Iranian efforts to reconstitute its nuclear program and rebuild its network of regional proxy groups following the June 2025 twelve-day war. Any direct confrontation between Tehran and Jerusalem could quickly draw in the United States and destabilize the wider Middle East, disrupt global energy markets, and provoke retaliation across multiple fronts.

East Asia represents another critical flashpoint. Intensified Chinese military, economic, and political pressure on Taiwan is rated as a moderate-likelihood but high-impact contingency. Experts warn that such pressure could precipitate a severe cross-strait crisis involving not only China and Taiwan but also the United States and regional allies. The Taiwan Strait scenario exemplifies the enduring risk of great power conflict, where miscalculation or escalation could lead to direct confrontation between nuclear-armed states. Similarly, the resumption of North Korean nuclear weapons tests is assessed as moderately likely and highly impactful, with the potential to trigger armed confrontation on the Korean Peninsula involving multiple regional powers and U.S. forces.

Notably, the survey also places domestic instability within the United States itself among the most serious risks. Growing political violence and popular unrest in the U.S. is rated as both highly likely and highly impactful, reflecting heightened political polarization, the potential deployment of domestic security forces, and the broader erosion of democratic norms. This marks a return to the top tier for a contingency that had previously been downgraded, underscoring expert concern that internal instability could undermine U.S. governance, distract policymakers, and weaken Washington’s capacity to respond effectively to international crises.

Beyond the top tier, the survey’s Tier II contingencies reveal a wide array of conflicts that, while less likely to directly trigger U.S. military intervention, nevertheless pose significant humanitarian, regional, or strategic risks. Africa features prominently here, with Sudan identified as the single most likely conflict to escalate in 2026 among all contingencies surveyed. Experts anticipate that further escalation of Sudan’s civil war could lead to mass atrocities, large-scale civilian displacement, and spillover violence affecting neighboring countries. Although the direct impact on U.S. interests is judged to be relatively low, the scale of human suffering and regional destabilization makes Sudan a priority for preventive diplomacy.

Other Tier II risks include worsening violence in Haiti, where clashes between armed groups and security forces are expected to intensify amid political dysfunction and the failure of international stabilization efforts. In South Sudan, further delays in long-postponed elections are likely to trigger renewed fighting between ethnic and political factions, threatening the fragile central government. In Somalia, the potential withdrawal of U.S. security assistance raises the prospect of increased terrorist attacks and expanded territorial control by groups such as Al-Shabaab and ISIS. These cases illustrate how fragile states, weak governance, and international disengagement can combine to produce cascading security crises.

The Middle East again features heavily in Tier II scenarios, particularly in Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. Houthi attacks on Israel and international shipping lanes are expected to provoke retaliatory actions that further degrade Yemen’s already shattered state capacity and deepen the humanitarian catastrophe. In Lebanon, the government’s failure to disarm Hezbollah, combined with continued Israeli military strikes, risks igniting a wider sectarian conflict. Syria, meanwhile, faces the prospect of renewed civil war driven by growing sectarian violence, a resurgence of ISIS, and military interventions by Israel and Turkey that weaken central authority and accelerate state fragmentation.

South Asia and the Western Hemisphere are not immune to these dangers. Renewed armed conflict between India and Pakistan is considered a moderate-likelihood, moderate-impact contingency, driven by heightened terrorist activity and repression in Indian-administered Kashmir. In the Americas, heightened concern in the United States over illicit drug production and trafficking raises the possibility of direct U.S. military strikes in Mexico, a low-likelihood but high-impact scenario with profound implications for bilateral relations and regional stability. Similarly, the risk of U.S. military operations escalating into direct strikes in Venezuela, destabilizing the Maduro government, is assessed as a high-likelihood, high-impact contingency and marks one of the most notable new additions to the 2026 survey.

Tier III contingencies, while generally assessed as having lower direct impact on U.S. interests, nevertheless represent serious sources of instability and human suffering. These include growing insurgencies across the Sahel, particularly in Mali, persistent state weakness and Islamist terrorism in northeastern Nigeria, intensifying conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo involving Rwanda-backed militias, and political and religious violence in Bangladesh linked to election delays and governance crises. Myanmar’s accelerating state collapse, Mozambique’s intensifying insurgency, renewed tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and cross-border conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan further illustrate the breadth of global instability confronting policymakers.

The survey’s overall takeaways paint a bleak picture. Of the thirty contingencies assessed, twenty-eight are judged to be either highly or moderately likely to occur in 2026, and seventeen are expected to have a high or moderate impact on U.S. interests. The distribution of risks is geographically broad, but certain patterns stand out. The Middle East remains central to U.S. security concerns, with six conflicts in the region rated as Tier I or Tier II priorities, all involving Israel to some degree. Africa accounts for the largest number of contingencies overall, reflecting the continent’s vulnerability to state collapse, insurgency, and humanitarian crises, even if many of these conflicts are ranked lower in terms of direct U.S. impact.

The persistence of great power rivalry is another defining feature of the 2026 risk environment. Potential crises involving China over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, and between Russia and NATO, are rated as having the potential to draw the United States into direct military confrontation with peer competitors. While some of these scenarios are judged less likely to occur in the immediate term, their catastrophic potential ensures they remain central to strategic planning.

Equally important are the survey’s findings on conflict prevention and resolution. For the first time, respondents were asked to identify promising opportunities where U.S. action could mitigate or avert conflict. A significant number of experts highlighted the Russia-Ukraine war, Gaza, the Taiwan Strait, and the West Bank as areas where U.S. leverage could still make a difference, either through diplomacy, deterrence, or multilateral engagement. Others emphasized the importance of supporting international peace efforts in Sudan, Haiti, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where coordinated action could reduce civilian suffering even if durable political solutions remain elusive.

#### It also undermines governance of other existential risks.

Zak Kallenborn & Dr. Gary Ackerman 23, Lead Researcher at Looking Glass USA, a counter-drone consultancy and investment firm; PhD, Associate Professor and Associate Dean in the College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity of the University at Albany, "Determining the True Extent of Terrorism’s Existential Threat," Irregular Warfare Initiative, 09-12-2023, https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/determining-the-true-extent-of-terrorisms-existential-threat/

Systemic Harm

When global astronomers sounded the alarm in 2052 that the big one was coming, no one was ready. Only a few years previously, the resurgent Islamic State had managed to detonate a nuclear weapon in New York City. Manhattan was flattened, millions died, global financial markets were in ruins, and the United States was hellbent on vengeance. If a program had nothing to do with rebuilding the country or killing those responsible, funding was slashed to ribbons, if not cut entirely. NASA was a major victim of the budget cuts. Why should Americans look up at the stars when the world around them was crumbling? Any public or political attention to planetary defense had faded decades ago.

Systemic harms are attacks that are not necessarily intended to cause existential harm, but cause enough harm that the international community is unwilling or unable to mitigate existential risks. Here, the harm is generated primarily through the reaction to terrorist attacks. For example, an extreme attack on the United States akin to 9/11 may cause the country to focus entirely on counterterrorism, reducing budgetary and legislative attention to reducing existential risks. Alternatively, cycles of government oppression and terrorist response might destabilize society enough to weaken global cooperation and the capacity to adequately mitigate existential risks. Whether systemic harm translates to actual extinction will be highly contingent, however, because extinction requires an existential risk scenario (e.g. global nuclear war or an incoming asteroid) to manifest while the global community is distracted or weakened. Once the world restabilizes, existential risks could receive their due attention.

### 1AC---Plan

#### Plan: The United States federal government should substantially strengthen federal employees’ collective bargaining rights.

### 1AC---Solvency

#### SOLVENCY.

#### The plan solves AND is reverse causal. Interviews confirm it.

Hannah Garden-Monheit & Tresa Joseph 25, JD, Senior Fellow, American Economic Liberties Project. Former Director, Office of Policy Planning, Federal Trade Commission; JD, Former Senior Policy Advisor, National Economic Council, "Quickly Build Modern, Nimble Teams," in Building a More Effective, Responsive Government: Lessons Learned from the Biden-Harris Administration, Chapter 8, 10/28/2025, pg. 79-87.

Before Trump and DOGE, the federal workforce was overwhelmingly composed of underpaid, underappreciated public servants who relentlessly pushed through bureaucratic inertia to get things done—overcoming tremendous obstacles, often at great personal cost, out of a sense of duty to the American people. Yet interviewees also acknowledged that, even then, the government’s personnel model was less than perfect. Interviewees recounted problems when political appointees lacked the operational skills to execute in a government setting, and they described slow, outmoded hiring practices, a lack of meaningful performance management, and rigid institutional boundaries as impediments to adapting and delivering in a fast-changing, complex economy.

Now, DOGE has decimated the federal workforce, cruelly and indiscriminately firing or pushing out about 300,000 federal workers, without regard to their performance or the critical functions they performed,140 and stripping hundreds of thousands of workers of their rights to collectively bargain.141 This not only immediately harms those workers, their families, and the American people they so passionately served, but this draconian period will also likely have long-lasting consequences for the attractiveness of federal service. In short, the traditional government service model—with its long-term job security, good benefits, a voice in one’s working conditions, and a chance to do meaningful, respected public service—has now broken down. In its wake, interviewees identified both a need and an opportunity to restore collective bargaining rights while also modernizing how the federal government hires, rewards, and nurtures talent. Interviewees warned that building a new and improved federal workforce will be a massive operational challenge—one that requires a new playbook, developed in close collaboration with public-sector unions.

#### CBRs are necessary AND sufficient:

#### 1. CAPACITY. They ensure recruitment and retention as well as actual work proficency.

Nicholas Handler 25, JD, Associate Professor, Law, Texas A&M School of Law, "Federal Labor Unions Strengthen the Administrative State," LPE Project, 05/05/2025, https://lpeproject.org/blog/federal-labor-unions-strengthen-the-administrative-state/.

Rather, and contrary to the arguments of many unitary executive proponents, unions further the legal and democratic accountability of the executive branch.

Tradeoffs in the Administrative State

First, it is simplistic to suggest that federal labor rights limit presidential power, while eliminating unions expands it. Bargaining might limit the President’s ability to micromanage (and manipulate) the lower reaches of the federal bureaucracy. But in exchange, the protections and autonomy provided by enforceable labor agreements allow the President to recruit skilled workers in a variety of fields (scientists, doctors, attorneys, economists, and experts in dozens more areas) to work for the executive branch, providing valuable skills for much lower pay than they would earn in the private sector. This expanded recruitment pool gives the President power to deliver on key campaign promises in areas ranging from environmental protection to national security. Labor rights thus represent not a diminution of presidential power, but a tradeoff of one form of presidential power (managerial) for another (expanded state capacity). Conversely, undermining labor agreements doesn’t really expand presidential power—it simply swaps out one form of policy-implementing presidential power for another.

Such loyalty-competence tradeoffs (or control-capacity tradeoffs) have been documented in other areas of executive branch policy. And at least in the area of civil service unions, historical evidence suggests that presidents prefer the expanded capacity of a robust civil service to the narrower power to micromanage lower-level workers. Indeed, one surprising aspect of the history of federal sector bargaining is that it was begun largely on the initiative of presidents themselves, the unions’ ultimate counterparty. President Kennedy first authorized civil servants to join unions and bargain by executive order in 1962, rights subsequently expanded by other presidents until being formalized by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 at the urging of President Carter.

Presidents repeatedly explained that these expansions of bargaining rights were necessary to recruit skilled workers (especially knowledge workers) to the executive branch, and thus to meet the increasingly labor- and skill-intensive demands of the modern presidency. As a major government reform commission explained in 1955, “[t]he Federal Government ha[d] lagged behind other organizations in recognizing the value of providing formal means for employee management consultation,” and as a result had failed to attract the white-collar workers it needed for more knowledge-intensive public administration. In short, the unitarist argument that labor rights undermine presidential power is both simplistic and short-sighted: labor rights offer the executive a different, more valuable form of power that is arguably necessary for modern presidents to deliver on their campaign promises.

#### The workforce is hanging on, BUT impacts will soon be irreversible.

Jennifer Bendery 25, MA, Senior Politics Reporter, Political Journalism, Huffington Post, "Trump's Latest Milestone: Forcing 211,000 People Out of Their Federal Jobs," AOL, 10/29/2025, https://www.aol.com/articles/trump-latest-milestone-forcing-211-180737108.html.

WASHINGTON – More than 211,000 people have been forced out of their federal jobs since President Donald Trump took office in January, with cracks showing in the government’s ability to provide people with needed services, according to a new analysis by Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit focused on better government.

The group has been tracking Trump’s decimation of the federal workforce, which was composed of about 2.3 million civilian employees in 2022. It found that another 10,295 federal employees have left or been pushed out of their jobs in the last month.

A few factors triggered the latest round of people losing jobs. Most were hit after the government shutdown began in early October, when Trump arbitrarily eliminated their jobs at the Commerce, Treasury, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Homeland Security departments. Some were cut by the Justice Department’s Executive Office of Immigration Review. Some opted for expedited retirement at the Defense Department.

The Defense Department has been bleeding personnel more than any agency. More than 61,600 people there have left or been forced out in the last nine months. About 6,000 of them left in the last month.

The Treasury and Agriculture departments have also lost huge numbers of people, with more than 31,000 and 21,000 pushed out this year, respectively.

The volume of federal employees being forced out isn’t the only alarming aspect of how Trump is hobbling the government, said Max Stier, the CEO of Partnership for Public Service. The administration is carrying out this process “in an entirely nonstrategic way.”

“It’s really ‘fire, fire, fire,’ rather than ‘ready, aim, fire,’” Stier said. “Every corner of our government has seen substantial loss of critical talent, and as a result, performance of our government across the board is being diminished.”

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Cracks are already showing in the government’s ability to provide people with services they rely on with hundreds of thousands fewer staff.

When Texas was hit with deadly floods in July, key positions were vacant in National Weather Service offices in the state, prompting questions about staffing shortages affecting the flood’s forecast. The loss of doctors, nurses and support staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs has added wait times for veterans seeking care in areas like cardiology, gastroenterology and oncology. The Social Security Administration’s ability to process claims has reportedly slowed by 25% amid staffing shortages and backlogs.

Still, Stier warned, most of the damage Trump is doing to the government is to its long-term capacity. Today’s federal employees report feeling demoralized by the Trump administration, and are currently working without pay amid the shutdown. These are the same people necessary for recruiting the next wave of federal workers, like air traffic controllers, food safety inspectors and VA doctors.

Between Trump’s hiring freezes, attrition and people being forced out of their jobs, that preparation for the next wave of hires simply isn’t happening.

“To look at the president’s past, I mean, he’s been a master at bankruptcy,” said Stier. “He is, in essence, taking our government to bankruptcy by spending our resources now and not investing in resources that we need for the future.”

#### Unions are necessary to inspire job performance and delivering the public service itself.

Robert Bruno 16, PhD, professor of Labor and Employment Relations in the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Brandon Grant, October 2016, “The Relationship Between Unions and Meaningful Work: A Study of Public Sector Workers in Illinois,” IUIC School of Labor and Employment Relations, https://lep.illinois.edu/publications/the-relationship-between-unions-and-meaningful-work-a-study-of-public-sector-workers-in-illinois/

This report, The Relationship Between Unions and Meaningful Work describes findings from a survey of a small group of Illinois public sector workers which investigates the work motivations of public employees. The study shows new evidence that government employees are strongly motivated to find “purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work.” Additionally, we find that government employees view their public sector union as a primary source of intrinsic motivation.

The unions that public sector workers belong to, do more than simply negotiate and enforce collective bargaining agreements. As our findings suggest, they are also related to the competence and performance level of public sector employees. But perhaps more provocatively, it is likely that the union plays an important role in the meaningful work that they experience while on the job, the job satisfaction they experience, and the prosocial values they maintain; some of the very factors that draw individuals into public service.

The policy implications for Illinois and other states are obvious. First, by taking away the right to unionize or denigrating the value of collective bargaining, as occurred in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan the state may be removing one of the most important incentives to recruit highly educated people to public service. Second, a weaker or nonexistent unionized government labor force may transform the choice of public service into merely a self-interested financial exchange; labor becomes just another commodity.

Finally and most potentially troubling, if workers are without a collective identity that potentially facilitates their quest for meaningful work and subsequently, they perceive their employment as primarily or solely as a way to earn living, then public service itself loses a significant portion of its service dimension. Ironically, weakening the institution that is unjustifiably characterized as imposing a financial burden on citizens may produce a workforce that labors for little more than a paycheck. Fair compensation should be a minimum requirement for government employees, but so should a commitment to preserving the people’s common assets.

Our study challenges the claim that public sector unions act contrary to the common good. We found evidence that not only do workers who choose to pursue careers in the public sector do so in spite of the comparative lower wages that they earn, but that the unions they belong to strongly related to their desire to accomplish more thorough work than earning an income. Work in the public sector serves as a vehicle to fulfill, at least in part, a personal need to experience a meaningful life and job.

What this study reveals is that a demeaning one-dimensional narrative of public employees badly mischaracterizes public servants.

Introduction

“The institution of collective bargaining is under serious attack in the United States. American public sector unions and collective bargaining have been subjected to a vicious attack under the auspices of balancing government budgets, promoting ‘equity’ between private and public employees, and limiting the impact of ‘special interests’ on government policy” – Dau-Schmidt & Lin (2014).

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Work in the public sector is differentiated from other types of work in the United States by the fact that it is an employment relationship between a worker and some form of government. Careers in federal, state and local public service are characterized by lower wage levels, increased limitations on collective bargaining, subjection to partisan demonization, and since at least 2008 austerity budget measures (Bruno and Manzo 2013: Slater 2011).Studies have documented the compensation penalty that government and educational employees pay compared to similarly situated private sector employees (Keefe 2010). Government employees do retain advantage in earned benefits, and until 2008 a relatively more secure hold on employment. But the public-private sector difference in earnings, as well as the increased negative framing of government employees as burdens on taxpayers, raises the question of why individuals would voluntarily pursue a career in the public sector. Some observers have argued that one of the major reasons individuals pursue a career in the public sector is the relatively low risk-levels in terms of wage and job security compared to the private sector (i.e. Bellante and Link 1981). Others have made a more value-driven case, suggesting that individuals who pursue careers in the public sector are more highly motivated by intrinsic factors such as “work that is important” and work that “provides a feeling of accomplishment” (Houston 2000, p. 713). Recent research, however, has begun to explore other social motivators which might possibly cause workers to pursue and maintain employment in the public sector, despite factors such as comparatively lower income, and an increasingly limited ability to unionize and collectively bargain. Consistent with the previous research described above, the motivators that workers experience on the job can be categorized as either (1) extrinsic (i.e. objective things such as money or working conditions) and (2) intrinsic (i.e. the ability to help others or to do work that is “good”). In line with Houston (2000) and others, this report describes findings from a survey which investigates the work motivations of public employees. The study shows new evidence that government employees are strongly motivated to find “purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work” (Arnold et al 2007, p. 195). Additionally, we find that government employees view their public sector union as a primary source of intrinsic motivation. The next section discusses the study methodology and is followed by detailed results. A final section discusses the implications of this research. The study was conducted in the fall of 2014 as part of a research project at the University of Illinois, School of Labor and Employment Relations. All participants in the survey were members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) union, and employed within the 1 | Page public sector in the state of Illinois. Participants were selected due to the nature of the study at hand, and our interest in exploring the relationship between unionized workers in the public sector and their perceptions of the work that they do. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed for the purposes of obtaining as honest and accurate of feedback as possible. Data was collected from two questionnaires, with 61 and 72 items respectively, across two time periods approximately four weeks apart using paper-and-pencil surveys. Participants completed the survey while participating in union meetings. The data was then entered into a secure database, and all identifying information subsequently removed, to preserve anonymity. The response rate for both waves of data collection was 107, however not all 107 respondents answered every question on both surveys. Methodology The study was conducted in the fall of 2014 as part of a research project at the University of Illinois, School of Labor and Employment Relations. All participants in the survey were members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) union, and employed within the public sector in the state of Illinois. Participants were selected due to the nature of the study at hand, and our interest in exploring the relationship between unionized workers in the public sector and their perceptions of the work that they do. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed for the purposes of obtaining as honest and accurate of feedback as possible. Data was collected from two questionnaires, with 61 and 72 items respectively, across two time periods approximately four weeks apart using paper-and-pencil surveys. Participants completed the survey while participating in union meetings. The data was then entered into a secure database, and all identifying information subsequently removed, to preserve anonymity. The response rate for both waves of data collection was 107, however not all 107 respondents answered every question on both surveys. The data in this report were quantitative, and the findings were largely the product of descriptive statistics generated using statistical analysis software and are not meant to explicitly imply causality. Correlations among the variables can be found in Chart 19 in the appendix and are discussed below as well. Responses to survey questions are reported in percentages for all possible answers. Charts and tables are included in this report to demonstrate trends in worker perceptions of and attitudes toward both their employer and their union. A more detailed report of statistically significant relationships (such as correlation coefficients) between the constructs reported can be made available by the authors upon request. Although the participants in this study were selected because they meet a specific set of criteria necessary for exploring the relationships of interest, we do recognize that this comes with drawbacks and limitations. Participants were not randomly selected nor assigned to control and treatment groups. This does not affect the study findings, however, as this research is intended to serve as exploratory. No research that we are aware of to date has empirically analyzed the relationship between public sector union members and their perceptions of meaning in their work. Future confirmatory research should be conducted on this subject which makes use of control groups to alleviate the aforementioned limitations. Demographics (Appendix 1) The average age of respondents was 47 years old and the average employment tenure was 15.8 years. Additionally, the average tenure in the current job was 10.0 years and the average tenure with their union was 9.9 years. Men made up 73% of participants while 27% were female (Chart 1). The ethnic makeup of participants is 58% white, 27% black, 9% Hispanic, 2% American Indian, 1% Native Hawaiian, and 4% Other (Chart 2). The income distribution of participants is as follows: 10% earned between $21,000 and $40,000 annually; 13% earned between $41,000 and $60,000 annually; 34% earned between $61,000 and $80,000 annually; and 42% earned more than $80,000 annually (Chart 3). Survey Measures Personal Characteristics. Workers were initially asked how they identified themselves with respect to their prosocial identity, being a meaning seeker, whether they perceive their job as meaningful work, the degree to which they experience task significance, and the level of job satisfaction that they experience on the job. It is important to establish these base-levels of individual characteristics before we can explore how these characteristics might be affected by their union. All items were measured on a scale of 1-5, where: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. As commonly understood prosocial identity measures the extent to which an individual sees himself or herself as generous and caring. A meaning seeker is one who feels “their [life] matters and make[s] sense to them on an objective level” (Steger and Dik 2009, p. 305). Doing meaningful work, requires conducting labor that is both significant and intrinsically attractive (Steger, Dik, and McDuffy 2012). We also measure task significance “in terms of opportunities to benefit other people both outside the organization (clients, customers, patients) and inside the organization (coworkers, supervisors)” (Grant 2008). Lastly, job satisfaction is characterized by an individual’s general feelings about their job and the work that they do (Arvey and Dewhirst 1976). Union Characteristics. Additionally, showing how a worker perceives their union is important for establishing a relationship between a worker’s union and the ways in which that worker experiences meaning in their work. Here we capture (1) how workers perceive their union as being supportive, (2) how workers perceive their employer as being supportive (for comparison purposes), (3) how workers perceive their union as being impactful in their work, (4) how workers perceive their union as being ethical, and (5) how they perceive their union as being prosocial. As before, all items were measured on a scale of 1-5, where: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The Meaningful Work-Union Relationship. The final portion of the study includes five measures of workers’ relationship with their union and the role that the union plays in attenuating the relationship between a worker and how that worker experiences meaning in his or her work. These five measures are (1) relatedness to coworkers through the union, (2) identification with the union and its members, (3) commitment to the union, (4) job competence and union support, and (5) perceived choice and union support. As before, all items were measured on a scale of 1-5, where: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. Study Results (Appendix 2) The descriptive results of the survey are found in Appendix 1, Tables 1-16, as well as visually in Appendix 2-3, Charts 4-21. The average score for the five personal characteristics are 4.34 for prosocial identity (Table 1), 3.47 for meaning seeker (Table 2), 3.95 for meaningful work (Table 3), 4.11 for task significance (Table 4) and 3.85 for job satisfaction (Table 5). The average score for the five union characteristics are 3.89 for perceived union support (Table 6), which contrasts with a mere 2.87 for perceived organizational/employer support (Table 7), 3.71 for perceived union impact (Table 8), 3.93 for union ethical climate (Table 9), and 4.03 for union prosocial values (Table 10). Finally, the average score for the meaningful work-union relationship are 3.42 for relatedness to union and coworkers (Table 11), 3.88 for identification with the union (Table 12), 3.98 for affective commitment to the union (Table 13), 3.55 for job competence and union support (Table 14), and 3.19 for perceived choice and union support (Table15). These findings are discussed as well as their implications in the final section. Statistical relationships between each of the constructs measured in this study can be found in Table 16 in the form of correlation coefficients. With limited exception, all of the variables are correlated with one another and statistically significant, showing evidence of the relationships discussed below.

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This report investigated the claim that public sector unions function as solely economic agents who negotiate an exchange of labor for compensation and are primarily a cost burden on the taxpayers. Contrary to claims of a one-dimensional fiscal impact we find evidence that public sector unions provide workers with an important vehicle through which they can gain substantial non-monetary rewards from their work. Equally important, it appears that government employee unions can serve to elevate and protect the public’s interest.

The first five measures of the survey explore how workers perceive themselves and the work that they do. The responses for all three personal questions of prosocial identity show that between 88%-100% of participants feel that they are being caring and generous toward others. The average measures for meaning seeking (3.47) and meaningful work (3.95) also reflect support for intrinsic work motivations (see Chart 19). No more than 12% of respondents answered “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” on any meaning seeking items and no more than one in four employees answer similarly on any meaningful work variables. These scores suggest that even for public employees who are not actively seeking out meaning in their life, there is something about their job that provides them with meaning.

The well-above-average rating for both task significance (4.11) and job satisfaction (3.85) also suggests that there is a quality about the work being done that provides workers with the opportunity to positively impact others in a broader social sense.

Measures 6-10 (see Chart 20) unpack the characteristics that participants perceive about their union. What is remarkable about the responses to these items is that more than 75% of respondents either “agree” or “strongly agree” with the affirmative statements about their union. For example, when asked about the support that they receive from their union, 76% of respondents either “agree” or “strongly agree” that their union really cares about their well-being. Additionally, 89% responded that their union is willing to help them if they need a special favor. In contrast, when asked about the support that they receive from their employer, only 37% responded that they “agree or strongly agree” (less than half of the response rate to the same question about the union). Similarly, 54% of survey participants responded that their employer is willing to help if they need a special favor. But this rate is 35% lower than the same question about their union. As indicated in Chart 20, not only is the average response much lower for perceived organizational /employer support than for perceived union support, but these average response differences are statistically significant as well at the 95% level, meaning that workers in our sample feel that their employer is significantly less supportive than their union.

In the last set of 5 measures (see Chart 21), we examine how the union relates both to the workers themselves, as well as to the work that they do. Average measures for relatedness to union and coworkers (3.42), and identification with union and coworkers (3.88) suggest that not only does the union make workers feel more connected with their coworkers (60% either “agree” or “strongly agree” with the former) but that to some extent workers’ identity is tied to their fellow union members.

When asked about their commitment to the union, responses show strong support for their union (3.99). Asked specifically whether they are proud to tell others that they are a member of the union, 79% replied affirmatively. When asked about their job competencies and the support they receive from their union, on every item the average combined “agree” response was twice as high as the combined “disagree” answer. Cumulatively these responses suggest that workers perceive that the union is also responsible for making them feel as though they are better equipped to do the work itself. The final measure reported here shows a smaller, but slightly above responsepattern with respect to how the union affects a worker’s autonomy on the job.

As seen in Table 16, the correlational relationships between most of these variables are not only high, but very statistically significant. As an example, the correlation between perceived union support and other constructs such as prosocial identity, meaningful work, and job satisfaction are .417\*\*, .434\*\*, and .355\*\* respectively. 2 What this tells us is that as workers perceive their public sector union as being supportive of them, they are significantly more likely to identify themselves as being prosocial, perceive their work as meaningful, and experience high levels of job satisfaction. Similarly, the relationship between union prosocial values and the same three aforementioned constructs is .465\*\*, .342\*\*, and .286\*\* respectively. This indicates that the more a worker perceives their union as being prosocial, the more they perceive themselves as prosocial, plus workers are more likely to experience meaning in their work and be satisfied with their job.

#### 2. LABOR CONFLICT. Unilateral and arbitrary alteration of CBR decimates administration through external litigation, internal conflicts, and confusing postures.

Dr. Marick F. Masters et al. 20, PhD, Professor, Business, Wayne State University; Dr. Robert Albright, PhD, Professor, Management, University of New Haven; Dr. Raymond F. Gibney, PhD, Professor, Management, Penn State University, "The Ebb and Flow of Federal Sector Labor-Management Relations Policies under Four Successive Presidents," Employee Responsibilities & Rights Journal, Vol. 32, pg. 139-166, 06/19/2020, Springer. [italics in original]

In short, through the stroke of the pen, President Trump “rebalanced” federal sector labor-management relations by aligning collective bargaining with agency effectiveness and efficiency, expediting the collective bargaining process and barring the negotiability of permissive items, imposing strict limits on the use of official time to represent employees, and facilitating the removal of poor performers without having to submit such cases to grievance procedures.

We summarize the presidents’ policies on the dimensions identified in the conceptual framework (see Table 6).

[Figure omitted]

Presidential Appointments

We would be remiss if we failed to mention another major way in which a president may attempt to shape policy and practice. Specifically, presidents may significantly influence the course of federal sector labor-management relations not only through executive orders and managerial agendas but also through their appointments to labor and personnel boards. In this context, presidential appointments to offices lodged with the FLRA and the MSPB deserve mention. [The MSPB, created by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 along with the FLRA and its sub-units, has jurisdiction to hear disputes regarding alleged violations of prohibited personnel practices.58] The FLRA itself consists of a three-member panel appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate. No more than two members may be from the same political party. The same applies to the MSPB. The president makes additional appointments to the Office of General Counsel (OGC) under the FLRA and to the sevenmember FSIP. Appointments to the OGC require approval by the U.S. Senate, but FSIP members do not. The FSIP serves at the pleasure of the president.

Every president uses the appointment power to influence the direction of policy and practice set by the agencies in question. However, some presidents use it for more blatantly partisan purposes. Presidents may also, on occasion, leave openings vacant to disrupt the ability of the agency to function. The situation under the Trump administration stands out in this regard. President Trump has failed to make timely appointments to positions on the MSPB, which now has two vacancies and lacks the quorum necessary to make decisions.59 In addition, the OGC of the FLRA has been left vacant; the effect is that unfair labor practices charges filed with the Authority cannot be prosecuted without a sitting OCG. Parenthetically, in 2017, the president summarily terminated (by “accepting” unsolicited “resignations”) all the members of the FSIP, and replaced them with his own appointees, as is his prerogative. But the FSIP has operated at times with less than its full complement of seven members, leading to union-initiated litigation challenging the legitimacy of its operations.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) has sued the FLRA and FSIP for the FSIP’s issuance of a decision in a case involving the Social Security Administration (SSA), which had attempted to restrict the use of official time in negotiations with the union, which it declared had reached an impasse. In its suit, AFGE argued that because the FSIP was operating without the full complement of seven appointees, it has no authority to issue a decision, which in this case upheld management’s position on the dispute over official time. The union also challenged the constitutional validity of appointing FSIP members without the approval of the U.S. Senate. More specifically, the AFGE stated in its suit:

On May 29, 2019, the Panel issued its decision in SSA and AFGE, ostensibly resolving a bargaining impasse between AFGE and the Social Security Administration (“SSA”). 13. At the time that the Panel issued SSA and AFGE, the Panel was composed of a chairman and only five other members. 14. The Panel’s issuance of SSA and AFGE without a complete, seven-member panel exceeded its authority under the Statute, inasmuch as the Panel issued the decision without having a “Chairman and at least six other members” as required by 5 U.S.C. § 7119(c)(2)(emphasis added). 15. The Panel also exceeded its authority under the Statute by ordering final actions in SSA and AFGE that are inconsistent with specific provisions of the Statute. 16. Among other things, the Panel ordered the parties to adopt terms for Articles 30 and 11 of their successor collective bargaining agreement which are inconsistent with the Statute. 17. Specifically, even though the Panel found the terms proposed by SSA for Article 30 to be inconsistent with 5 U.S.C. § 7131(d), which requires agencies to grant union Case 1:19-cv-01976-RDM Document 6 Filed 08/12/19 Page 3 of 25 4 representatives “official time” to perform union representational duties in any amount that the agency and the union agree to be reasonable, necessary, and in the public interest, the Panel nonetheless imposed SSA’s proposals on the parties.60

Practical Effects

The varying initiatives across presidential administrations produced practical effects, as was clearly intended. Labor-management relations on a day-to-day basis inevitably reflect the tone set by political leadership in the executive branch. Agency managers, either by choice or instruction, carry out the wishes of those at the top. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the character of labor-management relations shifted significantly across administrations which have pursued vastly different policies.

In the Clinton administration, the consensus and research is that labor-management relations improved and, in some cases, led to costs savings and higher productivity.61 In contrast, labor-management relations turned in the adversarial direction under Bush as result of blending the philosophy of freedom-to-manage with homeland and national security.62 The unions litigated the new labor relations programs at TSA, DHS, and DoD, which complicated the implementation of these initiatives. As mentioned, courts issued conflicting opinions, and Congress eventually took steps to stop the implementation of some of the changes. The result was a confused state of conflict between labor and administration.

The Obama administration’s forum order improved labor-management relations, but its limitations on the negotiability of permissive items engendered considerable consternation among federal-employee unions. The overall program lacked the energy and force behind the Clinton partnership initiative, which was wrapped up in the broader effort of reinvention. Perhaps the most significant development under Obama was the determination made by TSA director Pistole, which allowed the 40,000 airport screeners to vote on union representation. A heated contest occurred between AFGE and NTEU, with the former winning the certification election to represent this group.63

President Trump’s efforts to “rebalance” federal sector labor-management relations has encouraged agency management to take aggressive postures in collective bargaining, claiming in some cases the authority to implement contractual changes unilaterally if the union does not assent to proposed adjustments, particularly with respect to official time.64 The unions have challenged management in several agencies to overturn these unilateral changes. They have also pushed for legislation to prevent the implementation of any contractual changes that have not been mutually agreed to through collective bargaining or the settlements reached through mediation or arbitration.

During the Trump administration, as agency managers have pushed aggressively to make contractual changes without union involvement, dueling decisions from different authorities have emerged. A major case in point occurred at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which had declared an impasse and appealed to the FSIP, which ruled in its favor to implement its proposed contractual changes.65 At the same time, the NTEU had filed an unfair labor practice charge against HHS, alleging bad faith bargaining. On September 30, 2019, arbitrator Robert Creo issued a 97-page decision ruling against HHS.66 The arbitrator held that HHS had engaged in bad faith bargaining in July 2018, identifying supportive evidence: failure to follow an agreed order of addressing contractual provisions; insisting on union counterproposals before meaningful discussions were concluded on selected provisions; unilaterally declaring a provision closed until a counterproposal was made; insisting on unilaterally terminating mediation; and removing mandatory bargaining subjects in its last best offer (for consideration by the FSIP) while including permissive subjects.

Conclusions and Implications

Several conclusions flow from the analysis of the presidents’ policies on federal sector labormanagement relations. First, the nation’s Chief Executive exercises considerable discretion over both policy and practice through powers to issue executive orders, direct agency determinations, advocate and exercise legislative authorizations, and make appointments to key positions. [Our review does not touch upon presidential powers with respect to the budget, contracting of governmental services, and making pay recommendations, which also directly influence labor-management relations in the federal service.] Second, the result of the exercise of presidential power is that the pendulum of policy and practice has swung widely across administrations. Third, these swings reflect underpinning philosophies of public administration and management, which have differed substantively, particularly between Republican and Democratic administrations. Fourth, the presidents’ management agendas telegraph much about the direction labor-management relations will follow, and the divisions of opinion reflect longstanding disagreement about the relative merits of constraining managerial discretion through union representation and collective bargaining agreements (CBAs).

Finally, even presidents who harbor comparable management agendas may take different tacks toward affecting relevant policy. President Bush 43’s approach is noteworthy for its emphasis on garnering legislative authorization to rewrite the labormanagement relations program, as was done at TSA, DHS, and DoD. In contrast, the Trump administration is focused on using executive orders and agency management to make change, bypassing unions when they present obstacles by attempting to make unilateral adjustments in CBAs.

A major implication is that federal sector labor-management relations is a politically moving variable. This protean nature presents challenges for conducting day-to-day operations with a focus on improving the effective and efficient delivery of governmental services. At times, parties seeking to collaborate formally may encounter stiff opposition from political appointees in agency leadership positions or run afoul of a presidential prohibition on spending public funds in support of collaboration. To overcome these hurdles, they may choose to establish performance-management forums that enable them to address issues regarding agency performance, which in the process may incidentally facilitate labor-management collaboration. Labor and management negotiating CBAs may also concentrate on introducing flexibilities in operations that allow for consultation between the parties on how to facilitate meaningful organizational change.

#### That forecloses necessary administrative development.

Dr. Howard Risher 12-2, PhD, MBA, Workforce Management Consultant, "Government Transformation Is Badly Needed," Government Executive, 12/02/2025, https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/12/government-transformation-badly-needed/409862/.

The distrust is a barrier to transformation. It explains the often-repeated headline, “70% of business transformations fail.” That’s why a Harvard Business Review headline reads, “Your Transformation Can’t Succeed Without a Talent Strategy.” Government has no talent strategy.

Clinton’s reinventing government showed the payoff for transforming government

The Clinton/Gore “reinventing government” initiative – the National Performance Review – enabled agencies to realize significant performance gains. The goal was “to make the entire federal government less expensive and more efficient, and to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment.” One of the initiatives four operating principles was, “Empowering Employees to Get Results.”

The first report was released six months after the initial announcement and already there were 384 recommendations promising to save about $108 billion. The initiative continued and eventually eliminated around 426,000 jobs and cut “thousands of pages of regulations.” The reward for employee suggestions was a $6 Hammer award, a symbolic award highlighting the $420 absurd accounting cost in Defense Department reports.

John Kamensky, who was a deputy director leading the reforms, summarized the reason for the broad success: Enabling “civil servants to see themselves as part of the reform can be a huge force-multiplier in getting action from all corners of the government.” To emphasize the point, the intent was to “invent a government that puts people first.”

The savings, along with a tax increase, enabled government to realize a budget surplus in each year of Clinton’s second term. In fiscal 2000, the surplus was a record $237 billion. (The inflated savings were $445 billion.) That’s only the second time the budget was balanced since 1960. It was accomplished with the enthusiastic involvement of employees.

The business culture transformation

The private sector started a transformation in the 1990s. It started with the 1990-91 recession that prompted companies to downsize and delayer – eliminating layers of management – to enable them to respond quickly to market developments. That increases a manager’s span-of-control, giving workers more autonomy and more discretion to make job-related decisions.

The decade also saw the rapid growth of knowledge workers who are most productive when they are trusted and empowered. That’s always been true in fields like medicine and the law but in government there are hundreds of job families where employee decision making is critical to agency performance.

The decade also marked the beginning of three important workforce trends – high performance organizations, great places to work and employee engagement linked to performance. A key point is that each trend contributes to better organization performance. Each trend confirms that in a supportive environment workers are fully capable of improving results. Each is associated with supervisory practices very different than the typical government work environment.

Recently, the COVID crisis and working from home heightened the attention to employee empowerment. Now the uncertain economy and the mushrooming importance of AI has triggered renewed interest in controlling costs, but in government that in no way obviates the role of workers serving the public.

Looking back, we’ve learned what’s needed to create a workplace culture “that engages, develops, and inspires a diverse, high-performing workforce by creating, implementing, and maintaining effective management strategies, practices, and activities . . .” It’s a holistic approach to management that supports employee aspirations and well-being. It depends on mutual trust. “Both workers and customers benefit” – and in government the public. The DOGE initiatives took government in the opposite direction.

A missing element – psychological safety

This problem is not new. It’s when employees are afraid of retribution if they voice concerns or suggest unsolicited ideas. This month the problem warranted an HBR column, “In Tough Times, Psychological Safety Is a Requirement, Not a Luxury.”

The problem held back innovation in industry for decades but the changes in the 1990s highlighted the importance of employee empowerment. The worst era was when scientific management dictated how employees worked. Decades later, owner/leaders in small businesses continue to believe they need to make all decisions. But top-down management denies what employees can contribute.

Unfortunately, candidates for public office often have no experience managing in large, successful organizations. In today’s fast-changing environment, front line workers have the best understanding of emerging operational problems.

Recent research, again from HBR, shows where there is mutual trust, employees have significantly “higher productivity, more energy, less stress and burnout.” They are happier with their lives. “Ultimately, you cultivate trust by setting a clear direction, giving people what they need to see it through and getting out of their way.”

#### Labor is certainly key.

Matthew Dudek 20, MA, Captain, Fire Department, City of Troy, "Executive Summary," in Catch-22: Relations Between Labor Unions & Management in Public Safety, Naval Postgraduate School, September 2020, pg. xiii-xv.

Though management may see unions as obstructive or unnecessary, in collective bargaining states, unions exist and have legal standing, and thus must be bargained with—failure to do so in a manner that recognizes the status of the bargaining unit may lead to labor unrest and ultimately a reduction in services and legal expenditures. Similarly, public sector unions must respect their role as public servants who work for the people. Overreach of authority and use of legal protections to force changes in the workplace can produce a toxic environment that makes positive collaboration difficult. Ultimately, labor and management must respect roles and responsibilities, among each other and for the public they serve.

Although they differ significantly from local fire service unions, successful examples of union labor-management relationships may be found in both the private sector in the United States and in some of the unionized military forces in Europe. Additionally, theoretical models of negotiations that could lead to successful outcomes based on an analysis of both sides’ concerns could achieve positive outcomes in the negotiation process.

D. CONCLUSIONS

Labor-management conflict commonly revolves around compensation and working conditions. A bargaining position may best be achieved by adherence to accepted industry standards and through study of agencies of similar size and composition. Unions and their employers should seek to relate to each other from a position of collaboration, not conflict. Both sides ultimately exist to serve the citizens and should conduct themselves with that in mind. Unions and the legal protections they hold are not likely to change, but changes in the environment in which unions and their employers operate may help alleviate conflict and contribute to efficient, effective services for the public from a fairly compensated and protected workforce.

#### 3. INPUT. They provide ex-ante AND ex-post constraints on fluctuations for workers and agencies.

Nicholas Handler 24, JD, MPhil, Fellow & Lecturer, Law, Stanford Law School. Associate Professor, Law, Texas A&M University, "Separation of Powers by Contract: How Collective Bargaining Reshapes Presidential Power," New York University Law Review, Vol. 99, No. 1, pg. 45-127, April 2024, HeinOnline. [italics in original; language edited]

But, as set forth below, this model of top-down implementation and bottom-up resistance is critically incomplete. More often, the President and the unionized civil service bargain over questions of management, rather than fight out their differences through the exercise of raw institutional power. Indeed, in a sharp deviation from the Progressive Era model of a politically insulated civil service, the CSRA explicitly empowered unions to act in a political capacity, including by lobbying Congress, litigating management disputes before Article III courts, endorsing political candidates, and speaking out publicly on questions of executive branch management and policy. Unions thus engage directly in democratic politics and serve as a key mechanism for bringing other democratic stakeholders, such as Congress and the judiciary, into disputes over the President's managerial power. In short, modern bureaucratic management is far more mutualistic, legalistic, and democratically engaged than administrative law scholarship generally presumes.

Section II.A below examines the substantive rights that labor law confers on civil servants, and the ways in which those rights can reshape presidential administration. Section II.B discusses unionization rights, including the boundaries and limitations of civil servant unionization and the role that federal sector unions play in promoting democratic oversight of the executive branch.

*A. How Substantive Rights Mediate Bureaucratic Relations*

Substantive labor rights, particularly those memorialized in collective bargaining agreements, are at the heart of how labor rebalances executive branch power. The CSRA grants extensive rights to labor. With certain important exceptions, particularly for salary and benefits which cannot be altered by contract,103 unions are permitted to bargain over nearly any issue affecting "conditions of employment." 104 The main limitation on civil servant bargaining, and thus the primary battleground in litigation between agencies and labor, are certain statutorily defined "management rights," which are enumerated in subprovisions of 5 U.S.C. § 7106.105

Through contractual provisions, the President and the civil service can agree to modify any number of key management tools, from employee discipline to performance evaluation metrics to merit pay. For the purpose of analyzing their impact on presidential power, contractual rights can be sorted into three categories. First are rights that act as a check on structural deregulation, or the use of abusive working conditions to demoralize or sideline bureaucrats in order to undermine an agency's substantive policy mission. Second, labor rights can act as indirect constraints on policy by shaping management tools, such as performance reviews and productivity requirements, that are well known to nudge civil servants' decisionmaking in certain ways. Finally, in certain circumstances labor can act as a direct constraint on policy by seriously limiting the types of enforcement directives management can issue to employees.

*1. Check on Structural Deregulation*

A major method of undermining regulatory effectiveness is to defund agencies, undermine the morale of agency personnel, and obstruct agency operations. Jody Freeman and Sharon Jacobs have identified many of the strategies that the President may use to [crush] ~~cripple~~ agencies while evading civil service protections, including imposing burdensome working conditions, reassigning staff to undesirable roles, "demoralizing" staff through denigration and abuse, and cutting funding, resources, and pay.106 These are not direct attacks on an agency's legal authority, but a "structural" attack on an agency's ability to function.107 President Trump's unusually aggressive posture towards administrative agencies has put structural deregulation back in public focus, but it has long been a feature of presidential management, as the controversy surrounding the Malek memo in the 1970s illustrates.108

Here, many of the seemingly prosaic aspects of federal labor law are important. The terms and conditions of employment that govern the quotidian existence of civil servants are precisely the sorts of areas that structural deregulation targets. Changes to remote work policies, scheduling, and other routine workplace concerns can be used to demoralize or undermine an agency's staff.109 Unions routinely leverage contract rights to prevent deterioration in working conditions, litigating issues such as increases in workloads,n0 compensation for travel and other overtime expenses,1" backpay for wrongful personnel actions,112 and how and when to award bonuses or special compensation required by contract or statute.'13 Agencies can also be required to bargain over reductions in staffing levels or reorganization of duties.114

There are numerous examples in which fights over working conditions reflect larger political struggles over the ability of an agency to properly carry out its statutory mission. The infamous nationwide strike in 1981 by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), representing federal air traffic controllers, is a useful example. The PATCO strike flouted the federal prohibition on civil servant strikes, in a bid by the union for higher pay and improved working conditions."s Instead of negotiating, President Reagan broke the strike by calling up military service members and retired controllers to manage the nation's air traffic and firing the strikers (who made up nearly seventyfive percent of federal controllers).116 While PATCO is remembered today for its catastrophic collapse, the union's founding in the 1960s was driven by a decline in conditions of employment that related directly to the substantive mission of the Federal Aviation Administration: Flight speeds for jet planes reduced the margin of error for air traffic controllers, while understaffing and aging equipment made working conditions for controllers increasingly difficult and airport conditions less safe, leading to crashes. It was the FAA's failure to respond to these worker complaints, and its attempt to cover up safety risks, that first inspired the formation of the PATCO union." 7

Contemporary examples abound as well. During the Trump Administration, the Department of Education was a frequent target of structural deregulation. In 2018, the agency purported to impose a new labor contract on employees without bargaining that, among other things, removed protections regarding pay raises, altered performance evaluations, and reduced rights regarding overtime, childcare, and work schedules.11 8 The FLRA subsequently ruled the unilateral contract illegal, forcing the agency to enter into an extensive settlement covering disputed labor issues." 9 Federal prisons were another key site of disputes over labor rights. The Trump Administration sought to cut budgets, weaken unions, and worsen conditions at federal facilities at the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), as a prelude to privatization of many key functions. The agency would, for instance, cut shifts for guards and replace them with untrained, non-custody employees to guard prisons.120 These policies were enacted despite Congress allocating money for staffing, which the Administration refused to spend. 121 At the same time, federal facilities experienced a significant influx of prisoners, including very large numbers of immigrants detained by ICE.122 BOP saw a major decline in prison conditions, leading to increases in assaults, health risks,123 overcrowding, 124 and declining staff morale. 125 The primary means for resisting these deregulatory policies was labor litigation. Many of these labor disputes concerned the precise tactics-shifting schedules, using untrained and unauthorized workers to staff dangerous prisons, understaffing, overcrowding, removing posts from union positions-that the Administration was deploying to defy Congress and pave the way for privatization.1 26 Workplace disputes thus dovetailed closely with a broader agenda of weakening prison standards and asserting greater political control over prisons.

*2. Indirect Constraints on Policy*

Labor can also serve to constrain substantive executive branch policy in many indirect but significant ways. It has long been recognized that certain presidential management techniques, while they putatively concern the internal business of overseeing executive branch resources and personnel, can impact substantive enforcement outcomes. As Jerry Mashaw canonically articulated, the administration of many large-scale federal welfare and regulatory programs requires a species of "bureaucratic justice," where fairness and efficiency are achieved through quality assurance, performance metrics, productivity quotas and other general, organization-wide management tools.127 Labor can reshape how many of these tools are used, in turn reshaping agency outcomes.

One important example is productivity requirements. Determining how much work employees are required to perform, and how they are to perform it, is a well-recognized management tool. These management tools have particularly important impacts on adjudicatory bodies and other discretionary decision-makers: Rules governing decisionmaking processes limit adjudicators' flexibility, while increased productivity requirements reduce the amount of time and effort adjudicators can spend on any one case, making it difficult to rule in favor of poorly represented or underresourced parties.128 The FLRA routinely enforces contractual limitations on the types of productivity quotas agency management imposes, intervening for instance in disputes over quotas for claims processing for veterans' benefits, 129 screening of passport applications by the Department of State,130 and caseload requirements for Taxpayer Advocates employed by the IRS.131

The Trump Administration engaged in particularly hard-fought disputes over productivity and process rules. The Social Security Administration (SSA) extensively litigated proposed productivity requirements for its unionized administrative law judges (ALJs), which would have sped up case timelines, potentially impacting the quality of decisionmaking and the amount of benefits awarded. An arbitrator repeatedly found that the agency's requirements violated the parties' CBA. A two-member majority on the FLRA, appointed by President Trump, however, consistently reversed these rulings,132 over the dissent of Member DuBester, the sole Democratic appointee, who found the policy to be a "straightforward" violation of the parties' agreement. 133 Immigration law judges (IJs), likewise, have used bargaining and litigation to resist increased efficiency requirements during the Trump Administration, which would have limited IJs' ability to assist asylum seekers during removal hearings.134 Similarly, the United States Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS),under de facto head Ken Cuccinelli,135 pressured asylum officers to reduce grants of asylum, citing statistics showing high grant rates, urging officers to use tools to combat "frivolous claims" and make only "positive credible fear determinations." 136 The union resisted these initiatives, which it characterized as pressure to "misapply laws" and "politicize" the asylum process. 1 37 The USCIS union likewise challenged administration guidance to exclude large categories of migrants from asylum consideration and to divert considerable numbers to Honduras and Guatemala, calling the policies "unlawful" and even filing an amicus brief in support of a lawsuit challenging them.1 38

Negotiated provisions governing selection and promotion likewise can yield "significant" divergences from management's preferences.1 39 Federally unionized technicians with the Ohio National Guard, for instance,negotiated extensive contractual requirements for promotions, including criteria used to evaluate candidates and differences in merit promotion procedures.1"' Agencies can be required to honor promotions dictated by contract.141 The FLRA has required the SSA to bargain over promotion plans for adjudicatory employees.142 Union contracts can also prevent discrimination. Unions included clauses in contracts protecting gay employees in the 1990s, well before federal antidiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people existed.143

Labor can also substantially reshape employment-based discipline and the hierarchies and incentives that disciplinary power creates. While agencies are subject to formal disciplinary procedures under civil service statutes, they often discipline workers through negotiated grievance procedures, resulting in sanctions that can differ substantially from those that might otherwise apply.1 " A prominent example of this phenomenon involved a group of CBP officers who were discovered to have exchanged racist and threatening messages through a private Facebook group in 2019. Even though the incident aroused public outrage and the CBP Discipline Review Board recommended harsh punishments-including termination for eighteen agents-following a negotiated grievance process, some of the officers received substantially lighter punishments, including letters of reprimand, paid suspensions, and only two terminations.1 45 Indeed, according to data recently released by the Office of Personnel Management, arbitrators who hear cases under labor grievance reinstate three-fifths of all dismissed employees, as compared with only one quarter of all MSPB appeals.1 46 These obstacles to firing and other forms of discipline are some of labor's most powerful tools, and are also among its most controversial: Many critics accuse union-backed limits on employee discipline of rendering government service less efficient, though the evidence on this question is hotly contested.147

Finally, labor rights condition the ability of civil servants to leak, criticize, or otherwise speak out publicly about agency policy. David Pozen and Jennifer Nou,among others,have described how unauthorized disclosures of critical information by civil servants can check agency abuses, inform policy debates, and shape agencies' agendas by shifting public opinion.148 Labor rights are a key guarantor of civil servants'ability to speak publicly about agency policy through testimony, statements to the press, and other means. The CSRA protects the right of employees, when speaking in their capacity as union representatives, to present the "views of the labor organization" to "appropriate authorities," which the FLRA interprets, in many circumstances, to include the press.14 9 Union officials can thus speak publicly about agency policy and management, even when line employees cannot. Union officials have leveraged their protected status to criticize executive branch policy in environmental regulation, education, immigration, and labor, among other policy areas.150 Unions also advocate for the right of other employees to speak out through litigation and labor agreements. Immigration judges, for example, have historically been protected by labor agreements in their right to critique removal policies, even if they are not union officials.151

*3. Direct Constraints on Policy*

Labor provisions may also directly constrain policy choices. Theoretically, many such provisions are limited by management rights.1 52 But labor has been pushing for such contractual provisions more aggressively in recent years, sometimes with the encouragement of sympathetic presidents looking to lock in policy preferences.

By way of disputes over conditions of employment, labor can resist substantive policy directives to which line employees are opposed for professional, ideological, or other reasons. As discussed in greater detail in Part III, law enforcement functions, particularly in the immigration context, are perhaps the most prominent example. Unions representing CBP and ICE agents have successfully used labor rights to challenge many substantive management policies touching core questions of immigration enforcement tactics and priorities, often over the objection that such challenges infringe on protected management rights. These include what weapons agents are issued,153 what types of searches they must perform and how,154 and what information officers must provide to detained immigrants, including identifying information about officers and information about potential legal remedies,155 among many other issues. Complaints about conditions of employment have been used, among other things, to delay the implementation of agency policies directing agents to prioritize detentions of violent criminals and to deprioritize arrests of minors and other nonviolent immigrants. 156

Under President Trump, both CBP and ICE negotiated, with the encouragement of the administration, for even more expansive rights to challenge any enforcement guidance affecting the conditions of their employment and to delay the implementation of those policies until any labor disputes have been resolved, a process potentially lasting years.157 Under the Biden Administration, unionized employees at the EPA are now attempting to bargain for similar protections that would preclude the agency from adopting any policies that violate certain principles of "scientific integrity." 158 These developments demonstrate the capacity for labor to become not only an influence on policy but, through the deliberate use of conditions of employment as a restraint on managerial discretion, a primary driver of it.

#### Absent that, employees exit OR underinvestment. Cross-national studies prove.

Dr. Donald P. Moynihan 25, PhD, McCourt Chair, Public Policy, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University, Former Director, La Follette School, University of Wisconsin-Madison, "Rescuing State Capacity: Proceduralism, the New Politicization, and Public Policy," Journal of Policy Analysis & Management, Vol. 44, pg. 364-378, 2025, Wiley Online Library. [italics in original]

The second threat to state capacity is politicization. In aggregate, research evidence suggests that politicization erodes both state capacity and performance. For example, a cross-national review of 52 countries found that non-politicized, merit-based hiring and tenure protections were associated with higher performance and lower corruption (Oliveira et al., 2024; see also Fernandez & Cheema, 2024). Comparison of program evaluations during the George W. Bush era for programs run by political appointees relative to those run by career officials show the appointees are associated with lower performance (Lewis, 2008). Historical State Department Inspectors General reports found that career officials perform better than appointees in diplomatic positions (Haglund, 2015). In certain areas, we see direct evidence of performance improvement using historical records that track the introduction of merit systems. The use of merit systems improved the performance of police departments in reducing violent crime (Ornaghi, 2019). A study of the postal system found that its performance increased after the introduction of the civil service system in the 1880s (Aneja & Xu, 2024).

There are multiple causal mechanisms by which politicization undermines capacity. Here I focus on the effects of politicization on the people in government, their skills and incentives:

* *Prioritizing political loyalty leads to the hiring of more politically connected but less competent individuals* (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Moreira & Pérez, 2024).
* *Public employees are more likely to exit when they have experienced more politicized work environments* (Richardson, 2019; Xu, 2018).
* *Politicization replaces moderates with zealots*. Civil servants tend to have more moderate political views than political appointees (Feinstein & Wood, 2022), and are more accustomed to organizational norms that they must temper their political preferences compared to appointees who seek to quickly implement their partisan agenda. Zealots are more likely to make errors and neglect constituencies not part of their coalition.
* *Politicization replaces experienced managers with inexperienced managers*. The average time in office for political appointees is 18 to 24 months. Performance differences between political appointees and career officials is explained by less task-specific experience among appointees (Gallo & Lewis, 2012; Lewis, 2008). The improvement in Post Office performance after the introduction of the civil service system was because of a reduction in turnover, especially in election years (Aneja & Xu, 2024).
* *Employees will have less reason to invest in maintaining and expanding their skills*. Individual employees have little incentive to invest in their own skillset in an environment where they can be easily removed, and where expertise is devalued. A history of the U.S. civil service system is consistent with this expertise model, showing that tenure creates an incentive structure where employees invest effort in building skills of particular value to the public sector (Gailmard & Patty, 2012). Contemporary public managers who face politicization are less likely to make investments in expertise (Richardson, 2019). ∙
* *Politicization creates a chilling effect that damages the flow of factual but uncongenial information* (Bersch & Lotta, 2024).
* *Politicization invites waste and corruption*. Procurement processes represent a huge portion of spending, equivalent to about half of domestic discretionary spending. Investments in civil service capacity reduce costs, giving the state greater capacity to manage contractors, while a reliance on consultants is associated with higher costs in infrastructure (Liscow, 2024). Maintaining sufficient capacity to monitor private providers of public services is essential to constraining waste. For example, every dollar in spending on civil servants to monitor Medicare overspending saves between $24 and $29 (Shi, 2024). Historically, civil service systems limit the ability of politicians to spend in ways designed to ensure their re-election (Bostashvili & Ujhelyi, 2019). Even with civil service systems, federal departments with more political appointees are more likely to provide noncompetitive contracts and see greater turnover with contracts, indicating political favoritism in the provision of public spending (Dahlström et al., 2021).

Politicization might be justified in the name of improved democratic responsiveness. And more politicized regimes do provide more responsiveness to the political executive in narrow terms. But they undermine democratic responsiveness in two other ways. First, responsiveness includes the ability to achieve policy goals, and weakening capacity undermines this type of responsiveness. For example, presidents are less able to effectively use one of their most powerful policymaking tools—rulemaking—when agencies have less capacity (Bednar, in press). They are therefore more likely to achieve policy goals by delegating autonomy to a nonpartisan civil service, even when they distrust the bureaucracy (Gailmard & Patty, 2012). Second, politicization reduces democratic responsiveness to other legitimate actors and other legitimate values, such as transparency. More politicized agencies are less responsive to information requests from Congress and the public (Wood & Lewis, 2017). This lack of responsiveness to Congress is especially pronounced when members of the opposite party make information requests, either about policy or constituent services (Lowande, 2019).

This research on politicization comes from varied settings—some from the recent or historical experience of the United States, and some from other countries. So, it is useful to add more nuance to the meaning of politicization as a concept, to better understand how patterns of politicization could change. For a considerable period, from about the 1970s until relatively recently, politicization of the U.S. federal government describes a president using two basic strategies: centralizing policy expertise within the White House, and using political appointees to strategically manage agencies, especially agencies that do not ideologically align with the president (Lewis, 2008). Both political parties applied such strategies, to varying degrees, within a certain equilibrium. The president was assumed to value a balance between loyalty to his policies and administrative competence in delivering those policies. The civil service system was assumed to be a stable source of institutional capacity, with basic workforce protections for employees. Within that equilibrium, the number of political appointees has gradually increased, from about 3,000 in 1990 to about 4,000 today, even as the number of career federal employees they supervised remained relatively stable since the 1960s.

That equilibrium no longer exists. Direct forms of political control are more extreme and the types of politicization are more varied than the centralization of policymaking power and strategic use of appointees. The core components of the new politicization are: a) a personalist presidency, b) creating fear via conspiratorial rhetorical messaging directed at public employees both as a group and toward specific individuals, and c) weakening of civil service systems in a way that enables purges of the disloyal and a blurring of the categories of career and political appointees. I consider each in turn.

#### 4. RESOURCES. Unions have more.

Nicholas Handler 24, JD, MPhil, Fellow & Lecturer, Law, Stanford Law School. Associate Professor, Law, Texas A&M University, "Separation of Powers by Contract: How Collective Bargaining Reshapes Presidential Power," New York University Law Review, Vol. 99, No. 1, pg. 45-127, April 2024, HeinOnline. [italics in original]

The civil service's move toward unionization reflects a broader recognition of the value of organized groups in protecting rights and pursuing key political objectives.160 Unions accumulate resources and expertise, allowing civil servants to mount sophisticated and well-financed defenses in labor disputes and to lobby effectively on key issues.161 Unions, for instance, are more effective at litigating employment disputes, a key tool in resisting the disciplinary efforts of management. 162 They achieve higher win rates than unrepresented employees before arbitrators, a key strategic consideration for unionside counsel, as well as a key source of criticism from opponents of unionization rights.163 Unions also bolster the ability of civil servants to successfully litigate employment disputes against agencies in other ways. Through FLRA litigation, unions have secured civil servants *Weingarten* rights: the right to have a union representative present during a disciplinary investigation. 164 Unions have likewise fought, with mixed success, to bargain for specific substantive rights for civil servants during interviews by agency inspectors general.1 65 Unions also provide extensive financial and logistical support to individual employees. The National Border Patrol Council, for instance, has established legal defense funds for CBP officers who are under investigation for their involvement in "critical incidents," such as the use of force.166

#### The impact is quality of rights.

Nicholas Handler 25, an Associate Professor of Law at Texas A&M School of Law, former Thomas C. Grey Fellow and Lecturer in Law, Stanford Law School, 5-5-2025, "Federal Labor Unions Strengthen the Administrative State," LPE Project, https://lpeproject.org/blog/federal-labor-unions-strengthen-the-administrative-state/

Third, and finally, by enabling the formation of unions, the CSRA allows civil servants to pool resources and organize effectively around a range of issues related to the federal workforce. Unions, for example, cultivate a sophisticated bar of labor attorneys that litigate both labor issues and a wide range of other issues that arise under civil service laws, anti-discrimination laws, and the U.S. Constitution. In addition to litigation, unions also have publicity and lobbying operations, bringing to public attention presidential tactics for influencing federal policy. As research has shown, formal rights have value—but they have much more value when they are vested in well-organized, well-resourced groups with the means to vindicate them. Unions provide such rights for federal workers, who often wield them in ways in that protect public services and help to protect congressional initiatives from presidential subversion.

#### Membership rates prove. They’re attracted to representation, not individual rights.

Casey Keppler 24, United States Air Force Major, litigation attorney at Joint Base Andrews, 2024, "The Propriety of Restraint: Assessing the Viability and Wisdom of Executive and Legislative Branch Action to Eliminate Collective Bargaining Rights in the Department of Defense," Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal, Vol. 41, No. 2, Spring 2024, pp. 297-362

The 86% membership-to-representation rate for federal employees, which is remarkable in and of itself, is even more so considering the seemingly limited potential advantages due to the narrow scope of bargaining and the numerous protections already afforded to federal employees via statute. 462 These voluntary out-of-pocket payments by employees are a strong indicator of the importance they assign to union representation. 463 Presumably, none of these employees would pay union dues if they did not consider themselves to be gaining something in exchange. 464

#### **‘Fiat’ is key to prevent Trump’s circumvention.**

Nicholas Handler 25, an Associate Professor of Law at Texas A&M School of Law, former Thomas C. Grey Fellow and Lecturer in Law, Stanford Law School, 5-5-2025, "Federal Labor Unions Strengthen the Administrative State," LPE Project, https://lpeproject.org/blog/federal-labor-unions-strengthen-the-administrative-state/

For all these reasons, President Trump has targeted federal unions for nearly a decade. During his first administration, he deployed a range of tactics to hamper and ~~disable~~ [disrupt] federal sector labor rights—from issuing executive orders directing agencies not to negotiate on a range of workplace issues, to preventing union officials from using work hours to pursue union goals, to unilaterally rescinding contracts at disfavored agencies like the Department of Education, to seeking the decertification of certain unions on legally dubious grounds. These tactics met with mixed success. But the consensus among Trump I alumni appears to be that they did not go far enough in curtailing supposed bureaucratic “resistance” to the President’s administration. And indeed, many high-profile alumni of the first Trump Administration spent the Biden Administration developing a set of legal arguments in favor of even harsher restrictions on federal labor.

The Constitution and Federal Labor Unions

As with other areas of federal law, this time around is different for labor. In his second term, President Trump is eschewing many of the incremental tactics (harsh as those were) that he pursued in his first term to hobble unions. The goal this time appears to be full-scale demolition of the federal labor movement. The administration has pursued a wide range of strategies to undermine unions. Among the most important are unilaterally rescinding major collective bargaining agreements at large agencies, like the TSA; leaving key posts at the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FRLA), such as General Counsel, vacant, thus preventing it from enforcing key provisions of labor law; and firing the Democratic Chairwoman of the FLRA in violation of federal law. Most dramatically, the President has purported to exclude an enormous number of federal civil servants (estimates range upwards of 700,000) from bargaining rights altogether, relying on an obscure provision of labor law that restricts labor rights in certain sensitive national security posts.