

# President Trump as Manager: Reflections on the First Year

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*Prior to becoming president, Donald Trump was widely known as a successful business executive. As a candidate, Trump promised to run government like his business. His supporters and critics, however, disagree about how the president has performed as a manager. In this article, we review President Trump's performance as a manager during his first year in office. We examine three dimensions of his approach—transition preparation, staffing, and management style. Notably, we find that the president's halting transition limited his effectiveness in the first year. Unlike previous presidents, President Trump chose neither a politicizing nor a centralizing strategy to gain control over administrative policy making during his first year. We also note that President Trump prefers a competitive and freewheeling decision-making environment but is struggling with the consequences of such a structure. The article concludes with an assessment of the first year and prospects for the president moving forward.*

Keywords: president, bureaucracy, transition, management, staffing, centralization, politicization

Perhaps more than anything else, prior to becoming president, Donald Trump was known as a successful business executive. His official campaign biography proudly described him as “the very definition of the American success story, setting the standards of excellence in his business endeavors...devoting his life to building business, jobs and the American Dream.”<sup>1</sup> On his popular network television show, *The Apprentice*, he was portrayed as a decisive and successful chief executive officer. As a candidate, Trump promised to run government like his business (Associated Press 2016). Among his supporters, this was a very attractive feature of Trump’s candidacy. One Trump supporter justified his enthusiasm by noting that Trump “leads an enormous, diversified organization that is worth billions.” Another explained that “[h]e oversees 20 thousand employees in multiple business entities in successful pursuit of 100s of initiatives both domestic and

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1. See [www.donaldjtrump.com](http://www.donaldjtrump.com) (accessed March 12, 2018).

worldwide" (Friedersdorf 2015). In a postelection YouGov poll, more than half of voters agreed with the statement that the president was a successful businessman.<sup>2</sup>

After the election, President Trump promised to select the "best people in the world" to work in the White House and moved aggressively to assume control of the White House decision-making apparatus with himself at the center. During his first year, the president declared that his administration was running like a "fine-tuned machine" (Collinson and Merica 2018; Struyk 2017). His supporters note a number of policy successes, including the enactment of a massive tax cut, a significant drawdown in regulatory activity, a large number of successful judicial nominations, and unilateral withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Paris Climate Agreement (see, e.g., Thiessen 2017). For them, the proof of the president's management success is in the policies he has changed.

The president's critics, however, charge that chaos characterizes the president's first year and numerous popular accounts pan the president's performance as a manager (see, e.g., Stewart 2018; Wolff 2018). Critics point to embarrassing blunders and scandals. They also blame the president for the slow pace of appointments and record staff turnover in the White House. In this view, the president's poor management has limited his success in Congress, his efforts to direct administrative policy making, and his ability to present himself and his administration effectively to the American people and foreign governments.

In this article, we review President Trump's performance as a manager during his first year in office. We start by reviewing the management challenge that confronted him. We then turn to an examination of three dimensions of his approach—transition preparation, staffing, and management style. We review the president's transition operation and preparation to become chief executive. We explore the president's efforts to staff the executive branch and the White House in the context of common politicization and centralization strategies (Moe 1985). We then examine the president's preferred style of decision making and its consequences.

Notably, we find that President Trump's halting transition limited his effectiveness in the first year, including his efforts to staff the administration and set up an effective decision-making apparatus. Unlike previous presidents, President Trump chose neither a politicizing nor a centralizing strategy to gain control over administrative policy making during his first year. We also note that, similar to Franklin Roosevelt, President Trump prefers a competitive and freewheeling decision-making environment but is struggling with the consequences of such a structure. The article concludes with an overall assessment of the first year and what we have learned and prospects for the president moving forward.

## Management Challenge

When President Trump assumed office on January 20, 2017, he took on a management job more challenging than any in the world. There is no other job like it. The U.S. government has an immense \$4 trillion budget and employs 2.8 million civilian employees

2. See <https://today.yougov.com/news/2017/07/27/donald-trump-was-successful-businessman-says-public/> (accessed March 12, 2018).

and 1.41 million uniformed military personnel (Congressional Budget Office 2018; Lewis and Selin 2012). Federal employees are scattered throughout the United States and the world (only 15 percent work in the Washington, DC area). To put this in perspective, the largest company in the world, Walmart, has annual revenue of \$482 billion, about one-eighth the size of the federal government. The Trump organization employs closer to 22,000 persons (Kruse 2016).

It is important to understand that a new president is not taking over one organization when inaugurated: the new president is taking over more than 250 large and complex organizations, each with unique opportunities and challenges. Every agency has its own mission and legal obligations. Congress has asked agencies to take on tasks as diverse as regulating markets, providing national defense, landing planes, delivering mail, protecting civil rights, and maintaining highways and national parks. Relatedly, each agency has its own culture, shaped by its distinctive mission and history. Agencies vary in the mix of professions that constitute their workforces (e.g., economists, scientists, lawyers, ecologists, etc.) and this also shapes how they approach problems (Brehm and Gates 1999; Miller and Whitford 2016; Wilson 1989). Any manager will want to be sensitive to these differences across organizations.

Agencies have their own strengths and weaknesses that present opportunities and challenges for a new president. Figure 1 includes data from a survey of 3,500 federal executives at the end of the Obama administration (Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2018; Richardson forthcoming). Top-level managers were asked to identify the agencies they worked with the most (not their own).<sup>3</sup> They were then asked a series of questions about the agencies they named along with a few others with which they would have some contact (e.g., Office of Management and Budget, Office of Personnel Management).<sup>4</sup> The questions were as follows:

- In your view, how skilled are the workforces of the following agencies? (1 = *Not at all skilled*; 5 = *Very skilled; Don't know*)
- In your opinion, do the policy views of the following agencies tend to slant liberal, slant conservative, or neither consistently in both Democratic and Republican administrations? (1 = *Liberal*; 5 = *Conservative; Don't Know*)

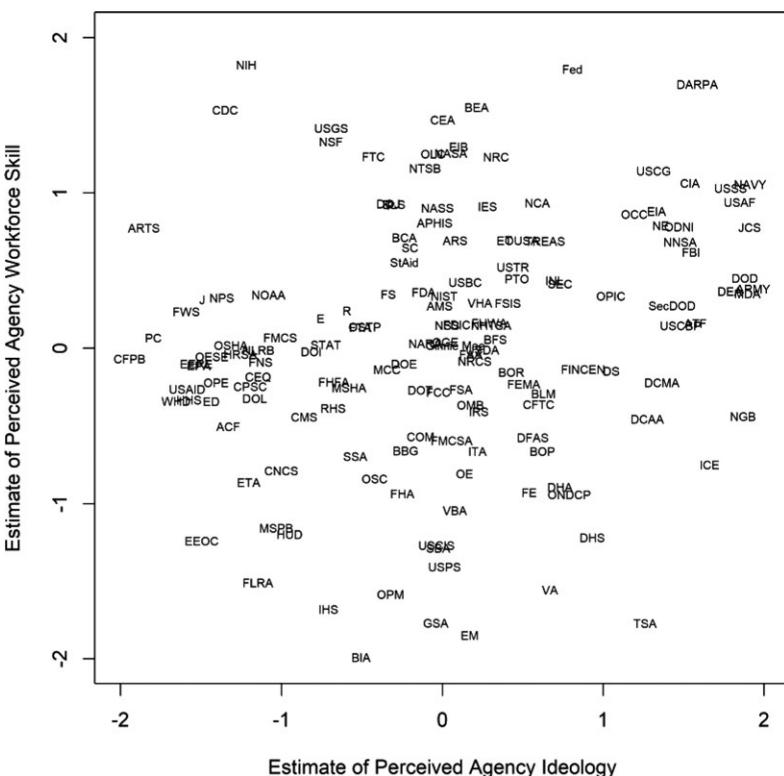
When the thousands of ratings were combined through a Bayesian multirater item response model, an interesting picture emerged. The data revealed significant variation across the executive establishment in the perceived management challenges and contexts confronting executive agencies.<sup>5</sup>

Some agencies have skilled workforces (i.e., higher values on the y axis), such as the National Institutes of Health and Federal Reserve, and others have workforces with poor

3. "Please select the three agencies you have worked with the most in order of how often you work with them."

4. Online respondents were also asked to evaluate three additional randomly selected agencies, including two bureaus in the respondent's executive department, if applicable.

5. This is mirrored in executive responses to questions about recruitment, promotion, and retention in their own agencies. See Lewis and Richardson (2017).



**FIGURE 1. Perceived agency ideology and agency skillfulness.**

Note: The perceived skill estimates of five agencies are omitted due to imprecision: Defense Commissary Agency, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Federal Home Loan Corporation, National Credit Union Administration, and AMTRAK. Source: Richardson et al. (2018).

reputations, such as the Office of Personnel Management and Department of Veterans Affairs.<sup>6</sup> Some agencies slant in a liberal direction and others in a conservative direction (i.e., left to right on the x axis). While factors such as law and professional values generally dominate decision making among career professionals, the ideological leanings of agencies can shape the posture of agencies in areas of uncertainty. And some agencies have privileged positions in the executive hierarchy in ways that can be consequential for policy making and implementation.

The enormity and diversity of the executive establishment means that putting a plan in place to manage all of these different agencies is incredibly complex. And the stakes for control are high. Due to the growth in the scope, volume, and complexity of government work, Congress has delegated significant policy-making authority to the bureaucracy (Epstein and O'Halloran 1999). When surveyed, a significant majority of these executives reported having “a good bit” or “a great deal” of discretion over things

6. The latter agencies were revealed after the survey to have significant performance problems. The Office of Personnel Management was hacked and the personnel information of millions of federal employees was compromised. The Veterans Administration had a number of scandals related to poor treatment of veterans, sometimes hidden by deceptive record keeping.

like the proper interpretation of agency statutes, the prioritization of some agency responsibilities over others, the allocation of personnel to different jobs or offices, spending decisions after funds have been appropriated by Congress, and enforcement priorities.<sup>7</sup> This means that any president that wants to change policy in a meaningful way better know how to manage the bureaucracy.

The president will have responsibility for managing the executive establishment but not all the authority necessary. The president shares responsibility for managing the executive with Congress and the courts. The former authorizes all agencies and programs and funds their activities. The latter ensures adherence to existing laws and regulations. In addition to an accumulation of laws and regulations, a corpus of regularized guidance and procedures has built up around the law that defines bureaucratic behavior day to day. Bureaucratic institutionalization is the product of past decisions and is remarkably stable absent direct intervention. Presidents and their administrations must decide how much effort to expend upending past practice and behavior in order to accomplish new goals.

In addition to the challenge of managing these agencies, the public holds the president responsible for the performance of the entire government (Neustadt 1990/1960; Lowi 1985). If the president is inattentive to the complexity of this challenge, the consequences could be dramatic. Failures to control administrative responses to a hurricane in Puerto Rico, a nuclear confrontation in North Korea, a growing humanitarian crisis in Syria, or a potentially catastrophic pandemic will reflect poorly on the president. The failure of administrative actors will become the president's failures.

## Transition Preparation

New presidents generally confront the challenge of becoming chief executive with extensive preparation. This helps them quickly set up efficient decision-making processes in the White House and make important staffing choices (Burke 2000, 2004; Kumar 2015; Kumar and Sullivan 2003; Pfiffner 1996). Fortunately, not-for-profit groups like the White House Transition Project and the Partnership for Public Service have worked with past Democratic and Republican administrations to document conventional wisdom about how to transition effectively.<sup>8</sup> Congress has also enacted important legislation to fund and facilitate transition planning by the major party candidates prior to the election.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the transitions between Clinton and Bush and Bush and Obama were two of the most effective transitions in history (Burke 2004, 2009; Kumar 2015).

7. Indeed, 63 to 78 percent report “A good bit” or “A great deal” of discretion when asked, “How much discretion does [your agency] have over the following aspects of its management environment?”

8. See, for example, Kumar and Sullivan (2003) and <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/> and <http://presidentialtransition.org/>, respectively.

9. Most recently, Congress enacted the Presidential Transitions Improvements Act of 2015, amending the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, which requires that office space, resources, and training be provided to the major party candidates. It also requires the outgoing administration to create an infrastructure to facilitate information sharing between candidates and agencies.

Existing transition materials provide insights for new administrations on how to staff the White House and how to succeed in the appointments process (see, e.g., Johnson 2008, 2009; Kumar 2008). They include details about how past administrations have managed their relations with the bureaucracy, developed a legislative strategy, and dealt with the immediate need to adjust the budget prepared by the last administration. For example, transition teams get advice like the following for personnel operations (see Pfiffner 2016):

- Candidates should start planning for the transition early, ideally the spring of the election year.
- Transition staff should vet people for key positions during the campaign (but do so quietly).
- Candidates should select a director of presidential personnel right away. That person should agree to stay for at least six months.
- The transition should set up a clear process for handling applications and filling of jobs and abide by that process.

The Obama–Biden Transition Project included more than 600 staff members and Mitt Romney's Readiness Project included almost 500 people prior to election day with others waiting to join after the election (Peoples 2016).

As a candidate, Donald Trump chose New Jersey Governor Chris Christie to direct transition preparations. Christie's team dutifully set up a Washington office and conducted preparations. The staff was lean, including only 70 staff members on the campaign's payroll by the end of June (Peoples 2016). This staff prepared briefing books for the new administration on a variety of subjects and detailed a framework for the 73 days between election and inauguration. The transition team prepared plans for agency landing teams and developed names to fill the most important of the president's 3,000 to 4,000 appointed positions (Restuccia and Cook 2016).<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after Election Day, Trump removed Governor Christie, as well as other prominent officials on the transition team (Berman 2017a; Rein 2017a, 2017b). They discarded much of the work Christie's team had done. The president gave responsibility to Mike Pence and to his son-in-law Jared Kushner. The locus of the transition shifted to Trump Tower in New York.

The administration was slow to get agency landing teams in place, fill appointed positions, and figure out White House operations. While some agencies reported good working relationships with the Trump transition team, many agencies reported delayed or nonexistent interaction with Trump administration landing teams. Obama Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy complained publicly in December 2016 that there was no one from the Trump administration to handle transition briefings or materials. The U.S. Agency for International Development had not heard from the Trump Transition Team as of December. National security staff could not transition effectively due to delays in security clearances (Wheaton 2016).

10. Transition teams usually also have suggestions for White House staffing and organization to ensure clear jurisdictions, reporting arrangements, and predictable paper flow.

The first head of presidential personnel left and a permanent head was not selected until inauguration day. The personnel operation included only 36–38 people, compared to more than 100 for most presidential administrations (Rein 2017a). The Presidential Personnel Office (PPO) staff primarily included persons from the campaign and no professional recruiters (Cook, Dawsey, and Restuccia 2017; O'Harrow and Boburg 2018). The president announced officials quickly for positions in the administration but frequently without the necessary vetting. This has led to scandals and the withdrawal of nominees such as labor nominee Andrew Puzder or removal of appointees during the first year, including National Security Advisor Michael Flynn and Staff Secretary Rob Porter.<sup>11</sup>

The president and his team were slow to figure out White House operations, from where lights were to appropriate processes for issuing executive orders to developing careful communications plans. Reporting during the early days of the administration described meetings held in the dark and guests wandering around the West Wing looking for an exit after meetings (see, e.g., Thrush and Haberman 2017). The president's team started off overwhelmed and off message. They served the president poorly. This is illustrated by the president's bizarre speeches to the Central Intelligence Agency and the Boy Scouts, the chaotic rollout of the travel ban, and the unparalleled leaks and infighting (Wolff 2018). Orders, including the president's travel ban, were neither extensively vetted nor combined with effective communications and implementation plans. Administration officials contradicted one another, and official White House documents were released with embarrassing errors.<sup>12</sup>

The administration is still suffering from the poorly executed transition. A skeleton crew of inexperienced and poorly managed persons started out in the White House. The White House still currently employs about 100 fewer persons than the Obama White House (Keith 2017). Mistakes made in initial vetting have had lasting consequences from Michael Flynn and Rob Porter to ongoing security-clearance problems that have ensnared the president's son-in-law and personal assistant John McEntee. One source of frustration for the president has been that he has not been able to keep control of the narrative in a productive way to accomplish his policy goals. Instead, he is always reacting to leaks or controversies.

## Staffing the Administration

Presidents generally try to govern the sprawling administrative state either by politicizing the bureaucracy or by centralizing decisions in the White House and bypassing the bureaucracy (Moe 1985; Nathan 1975). In the first case, the president carefully selects loyal and competent appointees and pushes them out in the bureaucracy (Edwards 2001;

11. Other prominent nominees that withdrew from consideration include Representative Tom Marino (drug czar), Vincent Viola (army), Todd Ricketts (commerce—deputy secretary).

12. For example, the White House released a list of purportedly underreported terror attacks that included attacks that had been covered extensively (Smith 2017). The White House also misspelled Theresa May's name multiple times (Onyanga-Omara 2017).

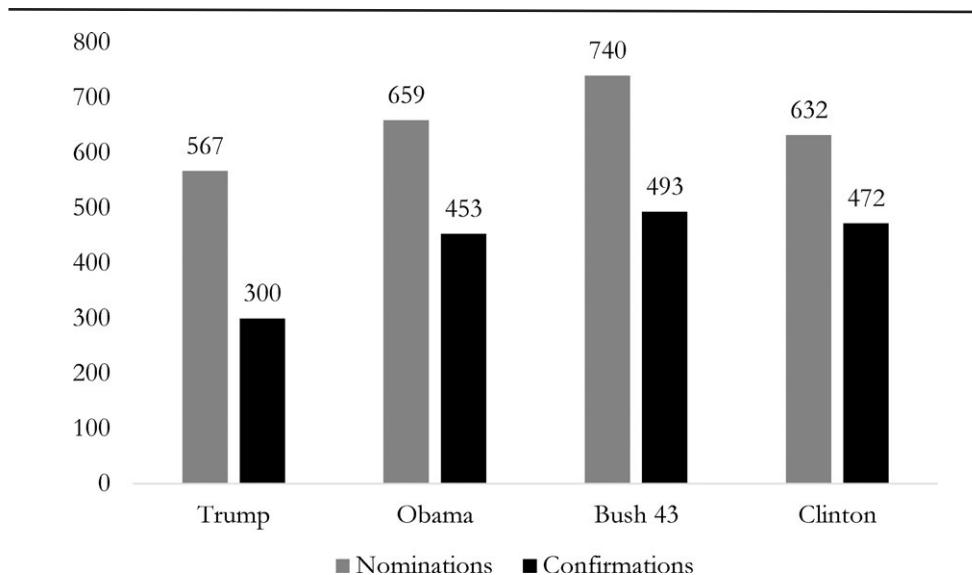


FIGURE 2. Nominations and confirmations of Senate-confirmed appointees during the first year, by president.

*Source:* O'Connell (2018).

Mackenzie 1981; Pfiffner 1996; Weko 1995). In the second case, the president builds up a White House apparatus to drive policy change, at least on key priorities (Rudalevige 2002).

President Trump has not adopted a general politicizing strategy. In fact, an unparalleled proportion of the key policy-making positions in the executive establishment still lack a Senate-confirmed appointee more than a year into his administration. While there is variation across agencies, there are still a large number of vacant positions in most agencies. There is disagreement about whether this is due to conscious choice by the president or a failure of presidential management.

There are more than 1,200 positions requiring nomination by the president and confirmation by the Senate in the executive establishment (U.S. Congress 2016). After one year, President Trump had nominated 567 persons for these positions and the Senate had confirmed 300. This is well behind the pace of the previous three presidents (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> By the end of his first year, President Obama had nominated 659 persons and had 453 confirmed by the Senate. This was slower than the pace of President Bush, who had nominated 740 and had 493 confirmed.

Of the more than 1,200 appointees, the *Washington Post* and Partnership for Public Service identify 640 as key policy-making positions. These include cabinet secretaries,

13. It should be noted that President Trump nominated more officials than George H. W. Bush (477) after one year although Bush had more than 100 more confirmed by this point in his presidency (O'Connell 2018). We exclude President Bush from this graph because he assumed office after the Reagan administration where he had served as vice president. Bush thus had the advantage of taking office after eight years of Reagan and had more potential holdovers in existing positions (Pfiffner 1996, 138).

commissioners of key boards, and heads of major agencies. Of the 640 key positions, President Trump had only filled 275 by March 9, 2018.<sup>14</sup> The president has had an unusually large number of failed or withdrawn nominations, including nominees to be secretary of labor and secretary of the army as well as nominees to be deputy secretary in the Departments of Commerce and Treasury.

The slow pace of appointments led to public grousing by members of his administration (Rein 2017b). Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke regularly pestered the PPO for progress on nominees and publicly complained about the process. Health and Human Service Secretary Tom Price complained to congressional Republicans that it was hard to provide leadership with so many positions vacant. Defense Secretary James Mattis also was reported to have fought with the White House over nominations to positions in his department. The White House, including Chief of Staff John Kelly and PPO Director Johnny DeStefano, has been on the defensive about the slow pace of appointments (Dawsey, Johnson, and White 2017; Rein 2017a, 2017b).

### Competing Explanations for the Delays

This raises the question of why the president has been so slow to fill appointed positions. It is worth remembering that this is an incredibly difficult task for any president. Adam Yarmolinsky, a former Kennedy staffer, recalled President John F. Kennedy saying, “I thought I knew everybody and it turned out I knew only a few politicians” (Gelb 1976). President Trump might well say, “I thought I knew a bunch of people but it turned out I only knew a few people in business.” The president has been limited by a thinner than normal pool of qualified persons seeking top appointee jobs. The president is an outsider to Republican politics and his views and actions during the campaign led a large number of establishment Republicans to identify themselves as “never Trumpers.”<sup>15</sup> Many more made statements critical of the candidate during the campaign that effectively disqualified them from service. As outsiders, the president and his team had fewer connections to draw from in identifying candidates for administration jobs.

The president's supply problem was made worse by the slow development of a workable process. The personnel process was slowed by the chaotic transition and has been understaffed and overworked since that time. The personnel process was structured around weekly hiring meetings and allowed input from key senior officials in the White House, including strategist Stephen K. Bannon, Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner, White House Counsel Don McGahn, and the vice president's chief of staff Josh Pitcock (Cook, Dawsey, and Restuccia 2017). Other officials such as economic advisor Gary Cohn were brought in for input depending upon the policy

14. He had 359 nominees confirmed overall by this date, including 84 deemed less essential in terms of policy making (e.g., U.S. attorneys, minor boards). This is compared to 518, 592, 587, and 475 nominees confirmed for Presidents Obama, G. W. Bush, Clinton, and G. H. W. Bush, respectively. These data come from <https://ourpublicservice.org/issues/presidential-transition/political-appointee-tracker.php> (accessed March 18, 2018).

15. For example, the conservative publication *National Review* published a special issue dedicated to their opposition to Donald Trump and 50 top Republican foreign policy officials signed on to a letter saying that Trump “would put at risk our country's national security and well-being” (Sanger and Haberman 2016).

area. Designing a process with multiple veto points, particularly given the sharply divergent viewpoints created delays (Wolff 2018). Having a large number of decisions wait for weekly hiring meetings also slowed the personnel process, particularly because the crush of White House business early in the administration could disrupt regular schedules (Rein 2017b). The supply and process problems mean that the president has been slow to nominate candidates and he has put forward nominees that have not been vetted carefully.

President Trump himself blames the Senate for the delay in filling many positions. The president's nominees have waited an average of 82 days in the Senate prior to confirmation. This is more than 20 days longer than in any of the previous four presidents.<sup>16</sup> This is surprising given that the president's party controls the Senate and individual senators no longer have the filibuster threat to delay nominees. While the nominees of previous presidents often effectively needed 60 votes to secure confirmation due to cloture requirements to end a filibuster, rule changes dubbed the "nuclear option" adopted in 2013 mean that nominees only need a simple majority for confirmation. President Trump has the most advantageous position of any president in recent memory for making nominations.

The president particularly blames obstruction by Senate Democrats for delay. He is correct that Democrats are using institutional prerogatives to slow down consideration of administration nominees. A significant amount of Senate business only occurs because of the voluntary cooperation of the minority. Senate Democrats have worked to delay some nominees by boycotting hearings. This delays consideration because committee rules often require a minority member to be present to conduct business (Pear and Lichtblau 2017). Senate Democrats have also delayed nominations by requiring that the majority go through a laborious process on many nominees, including scheduling cloture votes, ensuring an "intervening day" prior to such votes, and using the whole 30 hours of debate postcloture prior to a final vote (Hulse 2017).

While Democrats have delayed, part of the responsibility rests with the president. Due to the poorly orchestrated transition, the administration missed an initial window of a few months right after the inauguration when the Senate sets aside time to handle nominations. The president's nominees had unusually complicated financial backgrounds for staff to sort through and many were unusually controversial.

While Senate Democrats have slowed confirmations, this does not explain the slow pace of nominations or the fact that President Trump has not been particularly quick with appointments that do not require Senate confirmation.<sup>17</sup> It is also worth noting that,

16. According to the *Washington Post*/Partnership for Public Service data, the average time to confirmation for comparable positions was 62, 42, 48, and 53 days, respectively. See <https://ourpublicservice.org/issues/presidential-transition/political-appointee-tracker.php> (accessed March 19, 2018).

17. Below the level of Senate-confirmed positions, the administration can also select about 2,200 additional appointees that do not require Senate confirmation. This includes approximately 700 politically appointed members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) and 1,500 so-called Schedule C appointees. The former are selected for positions in the management level between Senate-confirmed appointees and traditional civil service employees. They serve in executive and managerial positions in federal agencies. Schedule C appointees are placed in policy and confidential positions and work for Senate-confirmed appointees or members of the SES, usually in staff roles (U.S. Senate 2016, Appendixes 2 and 3). President Trump named 1,305 lower-level appointees by September, compared to 1,773 for Obama and 1,216 for G. W. Bush (Appendix A). He named more non-career SES appointees than Bush but Bush named more Schedule C appointees and significantly outstripped him in the pace of Senate-confirmed appointees.

while the president has struggled with executive appointments, he has been successful with judicial appointments. Including Supreme Court Justice Neal Gorsuch, the president has nominated 80 judges and the Senate has confirmed 24 of those judges, including 12 circuit court judges.<sup>18</sup> President Trump appointed almost twice as many judges in his first year as President Obama. The president's process for judicial nominations has been different in important ways from executive appointments. He assigned responsibility for judicial nominees to White House Counsel Donald McGahn. McGahn and his team started work early, developing lists and vetting potential judges. They forged key relationships with Senate leadership to ensure smooth confirmation processes for these judges.

The president's own party has slowed many of his nominees as well. At least 11 different Republican senators have used Senate prerogatives to slow Trump nominees (Adragna 2018). For example, Cory Gardner (R-CO) held up all Department of Justice nominees over the administration's policy on marijuana. John Barrasso (R-WY) put a hold on a Department of Energy environmental office nominee over concerns about Russian involvement in the U.S. uranium industry. Tim Scott (R-SC) put a hold on two trade nominees to extract more responsiveness from Trump Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer. More recently, Rand Paul (R-KY) threatened to hold up President Trump's nominees to head the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency due to their views about torture.

### **Does This Matter?**

When asked about executive vacancies, President Trump has not seemed concerned. Another reason the president has given for delays in filling positions is that he does not want to fill them. In one interview, he said, "I'm generally not going to make a lot of the appointments that would normally be—because you don't need them...I mean, you look at some of these agencies, how massive they are, and it's totally unnecessary. They have hundreds of thousands of people" (Lane 2017).<sup>19</sup> Is he right? Is leaving appointed positions vacant a good management strategy?

To the extent the president believes that the United States could have fewer appointees, he is in good company (see, e.g., National Commission on the Public Service 1989, 2003). When people advocate reducing the number of appointed positions, however, they are not suggesting that these positions be left vacant. Rather, they are proposing that positions be filled with career professionals drawn from within an agency rather than an appointee drawn from outside government. For example, no president wants to leave the Department of Agriculture without a secretary. Similarly, we might disagree about whether a career person or an appointee should run the Food Safety Inspection Service but not whether that position should be vacant. If you want a Food Safety Inspection Service there is no good justification for leaving the top job vacant.

18. In another interview he said, "When I see a story about 'Donald Trump didn't fill hundreds and hundreds of jobs,' it's because, in many cases, we don't want to fill those jobs" (Derespina 2017).

19. There are different counts circulating because scholars look at different time periods, count second nominations differently, or include non-Article III judges (e.g., Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims). See O'Connell (2018).

Having agencies run by a succession of acting officials<sup>20</sup> is neither good for management nor a winning strategy for accomplishing the president's administrative goals. It slows the work of government, limits the president's stated desire to run government like a business, and does not allow the president to control the levers of administrative policy making. Managing the administrative state with acting officials is a little like running a school with a team of substitute teachers (Berman 2017b). Temporary instructors cannot commit to curriculum or engage in long-term planning because of their inability to commit to being in their job in the long term. And they do not have the imprimatur of district contract.

Most large problems, such as preparation for a possible global pandemic or the development of reconstruction plans in war-torn areas, involve cooperation among large numbers of agencies and require sign off on actions at the highest levels. Preparing for a pandemic, for example, requires coordinated action by, among others, embassy officials in various countries, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Office of Global Health Affairs, the Public Health Service, the Centers for Disease Control, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Sun 2017). The U.S. government must work with the governments of other countries, international organizations, nongovernmental partners, state health agencies, and local hospitals and first responders. Interagency teams get made and remade as officials enter and leave top positions. Important decisions get funneled up to top officials like cabinet secretaries because there are no assistant secretaries or undersecretaries to sign off on important commitments. Only officials that can speak with the authority of the administration that comes from Senate confirmation have the ability to make the intergovernmental and interagency process work.

More generally, if the president wants to run government like a business, he must fill appointed positions. Running government like a business requires that he state clear goals and define bedrock functions and then refocus structure, process, and human capital on core mission and goals. The president needs appointees in place to communicate his goals. Even in agencies the president wants to eliminate or dramatically cut, he needs people in place to direct an orderly shutdown. We know from past experience that poorly run shutdowns or reorganizations can cost more than they save.

Perhaps most importantly for the president, if he wants to control the levers of policy making, he needs appointees. When the views of the new president and continuing government professionals clash, career civil servants respond in predictable ways. While civil servants pride themselves on being able to serve Republicans and Democrats equally well, many have very human responses when a new president takes office. At the moment, the majority of government workers have no Senate-confirmed boss. They have no one speaking for the president with the authority that comes from confirmation. No one has explained the vision of the new administration for their agency. Their boss has not yet told them that they are valued and that the new administration can work productively with them. No one has expressed to them the administration's confidence that all the

20. The Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998 places limits on how long acting officials may serve in vacant positions. At the start of an administration this is about 300 days, although the clock can start or stop based on the Senate's active consideration of nominations.

career civil servants will do their professional duty to support the new president. And no appointed leadership team is in place to take control of the levers of administration such as communications, budgeting, personnel, and legal affairs. The result is predictable. It looks as if the bureaucracy is resisting the president.

### Is the President Centralizing?

President Trump has noted that appointments do not matter; he is the only one that matters (Chappell 2017). Is the president bypassing the bureaucracy and pulling all key decisions into the White House? Most presidents that centralize do so selectively, quickly learning that too many decisions need to be made to have them all funnel up to the White House. What people often misunderstand about the presidency is that the president is both directing and being directed. Casual observers often imagine a president sitting in the Oval Office giving orders and driving the country forward. What is more accurate is that presidents are like traffic cops, accepting some ideas and refusing others. When new presidents assume office, agencies have a preexisting list of executive orders and pieces of legislation they would like the president to issue or propose (Rudalevige 2002, 2015) and so do members of Congress or the administration. The president and his team must stop bad ideas and encourage good ones, directing the flow of policy making in ways consistent with his agenda.

This freights the president's decisions about staffing and organizing the White House with special importance when there are few appointees in place. The president needs a process to manage the information flow and structure decisions so that he is not overwhelmed and yet maintains control. This is a function of capacity and design. The chief executive needs a large enough White House staff to do the work and they need to organize the staff the right way so that there is no chaos. The president's staff must ensure that he has enough information to avoid being misled and must organize his schedule so that key decisions are made when he is at his best. Every presidential decision needs a communications plan, an implementation plan, and a paper flow because the White House is directing, not implementing.

The evidence suggests that President Trump was slow to hire sufficient White House staff and develop a clear decision structure. He continues to employ many fewer staffers than all recent presidents and has been notoriously undisciplined in organizing decisions. In some ways, this explains why staff secretary Rob Porter was so valued by the chief of staff and why his domestic violence red flags were overlooked. The staff secretary brings order out of chaos. The person filling this role makes sure the paper flow is managed correctly. This official determines which administration officials see which documents and which documents get to the president's desk. By all accounts, Porter was exceptionally good at this.

Due to the thinness of staffing, the president has been forced to recycle existing aides into additional administration jobs. A number of key officials with incredibly important jobs now wear multiple hats. For example, Jared Kushner's portfolio includes the North American Free Trade Agreement, Middle East peace, and government innovation.

Johnny Destefano, the head of presidential personnel, is also the head of the Office of Public Liaison and the head of the Office of Political Affairs. Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, also managed the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau for months. Asking key staff to do more than one full-time job makes it more likely that those jobs are done poorly.

## Management Style

Attempts to comprehensively describe the president's management style this early in his administration are difficult. Yet a few aspects of his early approach are worth describing. The president has a noteworthy preference for an unstructured and competitive White House staff and he prefers to govern by directive rather than by a more intimate involvement in the formulation of options and their implementation. Reince Priebus, the former chief of staff, described President Trump's style in relation to the tariff decision in the following way:

I think what the president does—and he writes about it even in his own books—is he puts rivals around him, intellectually... You have people like [Commerce Secretary] Wilbur Ross ... and [top economic adviser] Gary Cohn, and he puts those two guys in front of him and says, “Okay, fight out tariffs in front of me.” And they fight it out; the media covers the fight, but ultimately the decision is made. (Balluck 2018)

Accounts like this and those detailing how he prefers a large number of people with walk-in privileges to the Oval Office are not unusual. They depict a president that prefers an open, combative, and freewheeling structure with him at the center (Haberman and Davis 2018). His natural preference is for staff with blurred and overlapping jurisdictions and unclear reporting relationships (Dawsey, Johnson, and White 2017). The president likes to give aides similar assignments and will often task aides with responsibilities outside of their normal portfolios.

The virtue of such competitive arrangements, as demonstrated in the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, is that they can help the president elicit useful information (George 1980). They are, however, incredibly taxing on staff. The White House has had higher staff turnover in the first year than any president in recent memory (Stewart 2018; Tenpas 2017). A third of White House staff departed during the president's first year, three times the rate of President Obama and incredibly high for any major private-sector firm. There have already been two chiefs of staff and five directors of communications since the administration started. The president's preferred style can engender factions and infighting and this makes work in the White House less collaborative. Key officials expend energy settling scores rather than helping the president accomplish his goals through administration (Wolff 2018). Advisors concerned about losing inside the White House expand the scope of conflict by taking their conflicts to the press. Michael Wolff's recent account of the Trump White House is noteworthy for how much staff were willing to say to him and the extent of infighting and competitive leaking among factions in the White House.

The president's staff arrangements can also lead to implementation problems because it is unclear what has been decided and who is responsible for after-action implementation (Dawsey, Johnson, and White 2017). When staff have clear jurisdictions, clear lines of authority and responsibility, and more organized processes, this is less of a problem. President Trump appears to recognize this and the appointment of General John Kelly was an effort to limit access to the president and structure what materials and decisions made it to the president's desk. Kelly saw it as his job to clarify reporting requirements and ensure necessary coordination among the various stakeholders to decisions.<sup>21</sup>

President Trump reportedly is unhappy with the limits Kelly is placing on him procedurally and substantively (Lemire and Miller 2018). He chafes at being told whom to see and when and what he cannot do. The president is considering serving as his own chief of staff after Kelly departs (Lemire and Miller 2018).

Competitive staffing arrangements are best suited to a president with the expertise and energy to serve as his own chief of staff. It is also important to remember that Roosevelt had a fully staffed administration, often with persons loyal to the Democratic Party or Roosevelt's New Deal vision. Roosevelt was a former assistant secretary of the navy and state legislator and governor of New York. As an outsider, President Trump does not have the political expertise of Roosevelt and so far he has not demonstrated a desire to acquire it. As a novice to government, President Trump does not know where administrative power lies and, apparently, many on his staff do not either. The president values a particular kind of competence—talent that mirrors his own, including the ability to be successful in the private sector and be a forceful presence on television or social media. President Trump's impatience with Gary Cohn and H. R. McMaster and selection of television personalities John Bolton and Lawrence Kudlow are illustrations of this preference.

The president likes to govern by visible orders and pronouncements, whether executive orders and presidential memoranda or tweets. Trump's directive style meshes well with his desire to noticeably try and fulfill campaign promises. Executive orders are direct and visible ways to take political action. They do not require congressional assent to issue and they avoid the delay and compromise that accompanies legislative action. The president's promises to do things like reduce federal employment, cut back regulations, withdraw from key international agreements, and stop funding sanctuary cities have all been pursued through executive orders rather than legislation.

The president's issuance of very general executive orders, however, should be understood as a sign of weakness rather than strength. The president's orders tend to say "Go figure out a way to do this" rather than "I want you to use this authority to go do that in this way." If President Trump understood the levers of power, fewer orders would be necessary. Agencies would do what the president wants without a formal directive and ultimately do it more effectively. Agency officials would use the harder-to-observe

21. It remains to be seen how long General Kelly will serve and whether he can bring order to White House decision making. Since the start of 2018, there has been relentless turnover and continued embarrassing leaks concerning security clearances and the president's decision making on Korea and Russia.

authority that exists to interpret statutes, set priorities, make enforcement choices, and allocate resources in ways that would accomplish the president's goals and withstand judicial scrutiny.

The real test of President Trump's administrative success will not be revealed until later in his term and after he departs. It will depend upon his ability to successfully derail ongoing efforts to implement the law and roll back regulations already promulgated. He has succeeded in slowing the pace of new regulations. His appointees have influenced agency enforcement priorities. He has also cooperated successfully with Congress to roll back 14 Obama-era regulations through the Congressional Review Act. The hard work of undoing other emerging regulations and redoing rules already promulgated remains. Courts have already rejected some Trump administration efforts to delay or stop rulemaking in areas like energy efficiency and emissions (see, e.g., Friedman 2017). Efforts to repeal existing rules will require new lengthy and complex rulemaking by the administration. To withstand judicial scrutiny, these rollback actions will have to be done carefully and demonstrate some change in the scientific or technical knowledge that justifies the change. A simple change in ideology of the administration is not sufficient.

Similarly, the president's first-year orders to accomplish his goals of defunding sanctuary cities, cutting federal employment, and reorganizing government require agencies to come up with plans and have those plans approved. After they are approved, agencies need to implement them successfully. This will require the hard work of securing congressional support and working with important stakeholders like U.S. attorneys or government unions. More generally, the White House must demonstrate the will and build the capacity to monitor agencies to see these plans to completion. The president himself has limited time and attention to allocate and he has not demonstrated the ability to sustain attention on one topic for very long. During his first year, Congress ignored presidential suggestions for cuts to federal agencies and employment in two separate budgets.

In some areas, the easy and symbolic wins have been accomplished. What remains to be seen is whether the hard work of implementation and sustained change can be achieved. While unilateral presidential actions such as executive orders have the virtue of being visible and quick, they are easily undone by subsequent presidents.

## Conclusion

In response to depictions of his White House as chaotic and dysfunctional, President Trump defended himself as a "stable genius." The president's team proudly points to a number of first-year successes. The proof of the president's effectiveness as a manager is in all that they accomplished in the first year. Critics of the president suggest that the administration's achievements have occurred despite the president's management performance rather than because of it (Stewart 2018). What could the president have accomplished had

he planned better, expended more effort staffing his administration, and used a more disciplined management style?

The Trump presidency is a good reminder of just how large and complex a job it is to be president. We have focused on the task of assuming control over hundreds of large agencies with millions of employees and billions in budgets. Yet the president's role extends to enacting legislation and conducting foreign policy as well as innumerable symbolic acts that play an important societal role. The enormity of the challenge raises the stakes for careful transition preparation, staffing choices, and engagement with effective management practices.

Most modern presidents adopt in their first year either a politicizing or centralizing strategy or perhaps a mix depending on the policy area. President Trump has made no concerted efforts either to push a loyal appointee team out into the administrative state or build a White House system that allows him to centralize decisions in the White House. Given this unorthodox approach to management, it is worth considering what his first year would have been like with a more traditional transition and concerted staffing strategy or more conventional management style.

The president's supporters and detractors probably would both agree that administrative agencies, with some notable exceptions, continue to do what they always do, interpret the law and implement it as they have in the past. Where the president's appointees have had success is in stopping policy from being made, particularly in areas such as the environment, public lands, and foreign affairs. It is easier to stop policy and decisions from being made than to change course. Yet this leaves the president vulnerable to reverses by the next administration unless changes are codified in regulation or law.

They would also probably agree that the president has been poorly served by an understaffed and scandal-ridden White House. The public presentation of the presidency has been destructive, from the White House's claims about inauguration crowd sizes to the president's own speeches. The White House continues to put out inaccurate, inconsistent, and error-ridden public statements (Nakamura 2018). Members of his own administration continue to depart and many criticize the president and his team.

The presidency is an office that can be shaped by the person that holds the office. It cannot, however, be remade anew by each new president. It is situated within a larger governmental system and historical moment. There are better and worse ways to do the job of president. Past presidents and their teams have been careful to document their experiences and what they have learned through experience. If President Trump continues to chart his own path and refuse to learn from past presidents how to do this job well, he may break new ground but he will also likely repeat the mistakes of previous presidents. The president claims expertise as a manager but during his first year his approach had few of the visible hallmarks of successful executives in business or government.

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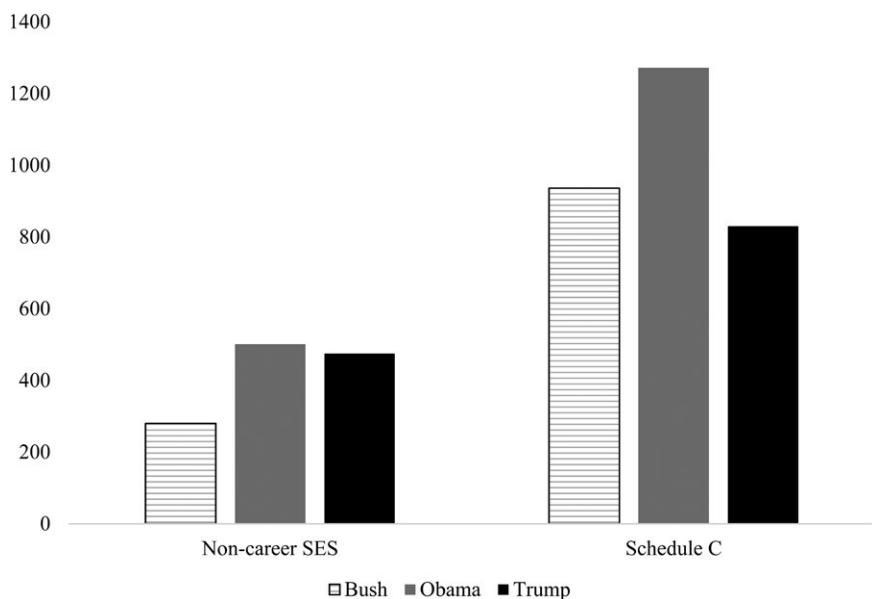
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Appendix A  
Number of Appointees not Requiring Senate Confirmation Appointed by  
September of Year 1, by President



*Source:* Office of Personnel Management, <https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/> (accessed March 28, 2018).