

Presidential Capacity

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Abstract

Some lament the lack of institutional capacity in the U.S. Congress. We show many of the empirical indicators of its incapacity are also true of the White House, and explain why. Presidents are thought of as pursuers of effective government who care about changing policy. We argue they are also politicians who credit-claim and advertise their work. This results in different organizational choices—about who to hire, how long to keep them, and how to structure their office. Using new data on White House staff employment from 1995–2024, we show that the president tends to hire people with public relations and media experience over policy experts, pull staff from members of Congress that are close to them ideologically, and that *within* presidential terms, the White House has an annual turnover rate comparable to the construction or manufacturing industry. Our study revises what it means for presidents to “politicize” the presidency.

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Some lament the lack of capacity in the contemporary U.S. Congress. It is staffed by young, underpaid, political neophytes without much experience in government, who are focused on messaging over governing, and who turn over quickly in pursuit of more lucrative careers elsewhere. In this study, we show that all of those facts are also true of the American presidency, and explain why.

The growth of the “presidential branch” is one of the more important historical developments in American political institutions. FDR had about as many people working directly for him as the night shift at your neighborhood Taco Bell. Today, the White House employs about 600 people, gets even more on temporary loan, and directs the activity of an executive office that employs thousands more. According to prevailing scholarship, the change was a gradual, strategic response motivated by presidents’ need to control the administrative state and secure policy wins (Moe, 1985). Congress let it happen, and even encouraged it—knowing that since the president would be making policy anyway, it was better for that policy to be made with the best possible expertise (Gailmard and Patty, 2013; Dearborn, 2021). In short, presidents used the White House to build the capacity to control policy from the top, down.

In this study, we present a theory of presidential capacity that accounts for contemporary developments in the White House that are at odds with this conventional view. We argue, like others, that presidents need personnel with scope to control the policies the executive branch selects and implements—what scholars of other political institutions would call “resource” or “policymaking” capacity (e.g., LaPira, Drutman and Kosar, 2020; Bolton and Thrower, 2022). But, as the only nationally-elected politicians, presidents also desperately need the public, other politicians, and interest groups to know about their accomplishments. They are mindful that the perception of success matters as much, or even more than, real success—that the symbolic matters along with the substantive (Lowande, 2024). As a result, contemporary presidents invest in people and offices that help them clarify their positions, take credit for what they are doing in office, and signal their loyalties (a la Mayhew, 1974). Staff cohorts who work in the White House are a product of both their desire to control policy, and their need to make sure everyone thinks that is what they are doing.

To evaluate this argument, we present a new dataset of White House staff employed from 1995 to 2024, collected from both publicly accessible and newly released archival records. We supplement these records with thousands of online profiles, biographical sketches, obituaries, and even wedding announcements, to produce the most detailed account of the training and experience of the president’s direct workforce ever assembled. These data reveal many important, stylized facts, some of which

are—at the very least—orthogonal to the goal of building the White House’s capacity for top-down policy control.

First, consistent with the conventional view, we find evidence that presidents are conscious of their need for the capacity to govern. Though presidents typically begin office with a larger share of aides with political campaign experience, relative to public service experience in the executive branch, over time, the pattern reverses. Moreover, they tend to hire staff who have worked for members of Congress with similar ideological leanings, which suggests they try to avoid fostering disagreement within their immediate staff.

Second, turnover rates in the White House are significantly higher than those in Congress, even after excluding presidential transition years. In a typical year, within administration, about 36% of the White House staff are entirely new—having never worked in this or any previous White House. The typical congressional office sees, on average, 10% lower turnover. This basic fact works against the goal of presidential control by undermining the implementation and oversight of policy initiatives.

In addition, contemporary presidents tend to focus on messaging and communications when they staff the White House. Though around 25% of White House staff have official job titles in public relations-related roles, today, almost 45% have work experience and training in this area. Moreover, paralleling recent developments in Congress, this kind of expertise has been ratcheting up in abundance in the White House. In addition, within Congress, those moving into jobs relating to communications, media, and press become more likely to be hired by the White House, relative to staffers in policy roles or legal counsel. Presidents are still more likely to hire policy-related congressional staffers, relative to the rank-and-file, but they are even more likely to hire public-relations staff.

Together, these basic facts are difficult to reconcile with the idea that presidents hire solely for policy expertise and preference homophily, are driven singularly by the goal of changing policy. They appear to value people with skills in credit-claiming, and have trouble keeping even those people. Today’s White House looks a lot like the “incapacitated” Congress.

We see an underlying strategic logic to what looks like incapacity. Indeed, our findings have important implications for how we understand “capacity” in the American presidency, and in political institutions in general. Many loathe Congress’ focus on messaging, copartisan teamsmanship (Lee, 2016), under-investment in policy-making expertise (LaPira, Drutman and Kosar, 2020), and subsequent under-performance (Lewallen, 2016). This study shows many signs of these developments have migrated to the White House. But, we argue these developments do not make presidents unable to do

their jobs. While they care about getting things done in a real, substantive way, they are also a politician attuned to the importance of symbolic politics—and invest valuable resources towards towards fostering their public appearance.

Political Institutions and Capacity

Political institutions are just ideas on paper with the material capacity to do their jobs. LaPira, Drutman and Kosar (2020) define that capacity as the “organizational resources, knowledge, expertise, time, space, and technology that are necessary” for an institution to “perform its constitutional role”(1). The center of that capacity is simple: people. Institutions “require a sufficient number of qualified, expert, and experienced staff to manage their [...] duties,” write Bolton and Thrower (2022, 6). They must recruit and pay quality personnel, and incentivize people to get good at their jobs (Gailmard and Patty, 2013; Fong, Lowande and Rauh, 2024). Absent this core human capital, a political organization will fail to fulfill its responsibilities—develop bad policies, mishandle their implementation, or balk when its prerogatives are under threat. According to scholars of the legislative and executive branches, this is precisely what is happening to Congress, and by some accounts, even in executive branch agencies.

In Congress, there are numerous empirical markers of a decline in capacity. Top line funding figures for human capital in Congress have stagnated or declined (Reynolds, 2020; Bolton and Thrower, 2022), with resource allocation shifted toward public relations and constituency service (Crosson et al., 2021; Lee, 2016; Jensen, 2011). Congressional staff spend less time on the Hill before leaving for more lucrative careers (Crosson et al., 2021). Congress’ nonpartisan instrumentalities like the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, and the Congressional Research Service have not grown (J.Fagan and McGee, 2022). The decline in typical member terms might disincentivize staff from acquiring institutional knowledge (Fong, Lowande and Rauh, 2024).

By most accounts, this declining capacity has led to worse outcomes. Congress is passing fewer laws (Warburton, 2024) and missing more deadlines (Pfiffner, 2020)—even making more basic, drafting errors (Lewallen, 2016). Committees, once the bastion of specialized expertise and staff stability, do not function well as problem-solvers (Lewallen, 2020). Parties may derive political benefits from this lack of productivity (Gelman, 2020). The general view of scholars is summarized by Howell and Moe (2018): “Congress is inexcusably bad and utterly incapable of taking effective action on behalf of the nation.”

Some of the same markers of incapacity are also evident in the executive branch. While congressional staff are regarded as too young, executive branch bureaucrats are thought of as too old. More than three-quarters of the senior executive service are over the age of fifty (Partnership for Public Service, 2023). Many agencies are perceived as having workforces that are “not at all skilled” at their core jobs (Richardson, Clinton and Lewis, 2018*a*). Turnover in the federal workforce has risen markedly since 2008 (Hur and Hawley, 2020). Moreover, the federal civil service has been numerically stagnant since the 1980s. What has expanded, as Potter (2023) points out, is the use of outside contractors, who are significantly less accountable—and more transient—than the civil service. Meanwhile, trust in the federal government continues to decline to historic lows (Partnership for Public Service, 2024). Vacancies in senior administration positions are on the rise, and have been linked to worse agency performance (Richardson, Piper and Lewis, 2024).

In short, scholars regard both the legislative branch and the vast majority of the executive branch as suffering from a capacity problem. The public sector seems to have a shortage of people with the skills and expertise, with one apparent exception: the American presidency.

While scholars say other political institutions have declining capacity, they say the opposite is true of the presidency. The expansion of the “presidential branch” is an essential stylized fact about American government since the New Deal. At that time, the president had three helpers on loan. Today, the White House Office (WHO) alone employs about 500-600 people, not counting the larger Executive Office of the President (EOP). Its structure, development, and growth are an entire sub-genre of study. Like members of Congress, presidents have a free hand to hire who they please and structure the WHO as they wish (Arnold, 1998; Dickinson, 2005). What explains presidents’ choices? What underlying presidential goals are served by capacity the presidential branch? There are two standard answers: good government or neutral competence, and responsive or “politicized” governance.

The first idea is the foundation of the field of public administration. It says presidents need competent experts who know how to make the trains run on time. They need a place with some institutional memory, that can handle administrative functions and make the presidential branch run efficiently. Those goals are apolitical. They are about serving some common public interest. Practitioners still regard effective administration as an important underlying focus. Christopher Liddell, Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy under President Trump, for example, writes “there needs to be equal attention paid to the operational effectiveness of the institutions of government” in part, because effective management complements the president’s political goals (Liddell, 2024, 6).

That brings up the other standard explanation for hiring and organizational choices by presidents—responsive governance or “politicized” responsiveness. Terry Moe writes that presidents bring “existing structures making up the institutional presidency” into congruence “with the incentives and resources of the president”(Moe, 1985, 238). Presidents do not just need competent administrators. They need people who share their preferences about policy and are willing to work toward them. The first motivation, for good government, is naive on its own. Lewis (2008), most notably, sees good and responsive government as an essential trade-off that underlies all the president’s personnel decisions. This perspective has influenced a wave of research on top-down control of executive branch agencies by the President (e.g., Kinane, 2021; Selin et al., 2022; Gibson, 2024).

Presidents have a lot of flexibility in placing political appointees in line agencies, but they are dictators when it comes to the structure and makeup of the White House. Their decisions are unconstrained, beyond a cap on what they can spend. Even that is fungible, as presidents routinely borrow people from outside the White House, or talk to consultants whose salaries are paid for by political action committees. In summary, presidents have been given ample resources, as other political institutions have been strained or drained. Presidents ought to build the capacity to control the rest of the executive branch, to find the most loyal and effective personnel. The trouble is, sometimes, they don’t.

In 2017, for example, the Trump administration moved an initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities into the White House, away from its previous home in the Department of Education. They invited one hundred college presidents for a photo-op in the Oval Office. They then spent taxpayer dollars—hired personnel, and gave that personnel physical space in the EOP. But, years later, those same officials said publicly they had little to do with policy change—either in its formulation or implementation. It is hard to square this choice with the goal of political control, and this is not the only case.

Former practitioners in the White House routinely pen recommendations for how the *next* president should organize their White House. These recommendations are usually fueled by common headaches. Scholars critiqued the Clinton administration for filling the White House with young, inexperienced campaign aides (Patterson, 1996). Presidents create offices that house vested interests and create competing lines of authority (Hess and Pfiffner, 2021). There are too many people in the White House who know “what” they want to get done, with little idea about “how” to accomplish it (e.g., Liddell, 2024). In the context of both the political control and neutral competence explanations, these personnel decisions look like mistakes.

More generally, no one would deny that presidents spend some of their resources developing a capacity to do things that have only a roundabout connection to effective government. The White House communications office is a frequent topic of study for presidency scholars (e.g., Kumar, 2010; Maltese, 2009), focused mostly on the various strategies, personalities, and styles unique to each president. It is implied that investment in a communications operation might make the president more effective as a persuader—that better speeches will get presidents the policies they want, despite the evidence that presidential rhetoric cannot move public opinion (Edwards, 2000).

There is little theorizing about these kinds of presidential choices, or how they relate to the underlying goal of controlling policy. The examples above are treated as sideshows or shortsighted errors on the way toward the main goals of controlling policy. The Trump White House was, supposedly, uniquely vapid and incompetent for reasons that have nothing to do with strategic thinking. The Clinton administration made early mistakes, which it later recovered from. Every political institution has organizational fluff, known as a public relations office. What presidents really do with the one thing in government they have the most control over, is bring in people who will help them control everything else. Presidential capacity can be treated, for analytical purposes, as singularly focused on policy.

We argue differently. Presidents do not just build the capacity to accomplish things in terms of substantive policy. They build the capacity to create the perception that they have. They must. There is always a fundamental gap between what they accomplish and what audiences think they have accomplished. So they spend costly resources building the capacity to manage their political image. They care about symbolic politics enough to use up scarce resources. This argument is supported with evidence from presidential staffing choices since 1995. We show that many of the same markers of incapacity in other political institutions are also present in the White House. Without our argument, these patterns would seem to be mistakes. But they are the result, in our view, of a distinct goal served by presidential capacity.

Theory: Building Presidential Capacity

Presidents have a few underlying goals: they want to be popular and they like some policies more than others. Popularity can occur in the present, as in the public's assessment of their president's handling of the office—which furthers the goal of re-election, and the election of co-partisans. Popularity can also come later, as what scholars sometimes call a historical legacy (e.g., Fong, Malhotra and Margalit,

2019). Presidents want to be able to imagine a future when they are revered as great heroes. Much of their behavior can be linked to these goals, but the behavior in question is organizing the presidential branch.

“Organizing” means hiring personnel, assigning their roles, grouping them in sub-units, creating, modifying, eliminating those sub-units, and determining who reports to whom. This differs from other presidential strategies, in that it is almost always one-step removed from their underlying goals. When presidents issue an executive order, or sign some dramatic piece of new legislation, the action itself influences their popularity and policymaking, and is a concrete step toward getting what they want done.

Organizing, on the other hand, is about developing the capacity to govern. What kind of skills and expertise can the president draw on? Who will carry out the tasks that need doing? When unexpected circumstances arise, who does the president want doing the actual work of the presidency? No organization is suited for all purposes. The staff of the Domestic Policy Council would be terrible in a rugby match. Presidents emphasize particular skills and experience when they build the capacity to govern. Organizing makes them proficient at producing particular kinds of policies.

If this were it, the conventional view of presidential capacity would hold. Presidents would build a White House that worked to effectively implement their policy priorities. The key hang-up, as one of us has argued in a recent book, is that “they know they will be judged by how their actions appear”(Lowande, 2024, 34). There is a fundamental gap between the perception of accomplishment and actual accomplishment. Every president complains they do not get credit for what they feel they have accomplished, and they take pains to close the gap. In April of 2024, for example, David Axelrod, a former advisor to President Obama, said that President Biden’s fledgling re-election campaign could be helped by an immigration order because he would “look like he’s seizing control of the situation.”¹ Biden signed such an order weeks later.

Presidents know that perceptions matter, and cultivating them is real work.² For a president’s purposes, policy has separate, complementary dimensions: substantive and symbolic. Substantive means the degree to which a policy alters the “doings of government” (a la Howell, 2013). For the president,

¹Lowande, Kenneth. “Biden knows executive order on border will fail. Blame our broken system.” The Hill, June 6, 2024.

²In this way, we see them as no different than members of Congress, who scholars think of as cultivating their public image through position taking, credit claiming, and advertising (Mayhew, 1974; Grimmer, Westwood and Messing, 2013).

altering the doings of government is a long-term process well-studied by political scientists. It is subject to both random chance and constitutional (e.g., Moe and Howell, 1999; Bolton, Figueiredo and Lewis, 2021) and de facto (e.g., Lowande, 2018; Rudalevige, N.d.; Benn, 2024) veto-players. The “symbolic” dimension of policy is about perceptions, it means the degree to which the policy identifies the president with a position and makes that position publicly known. It is more immediate, relative to substantive accomplishments. For example, the day President Trump tweeted he was banning transgender service members from the military, before a single enlisted person was forcibly separated, denied medical coverage, or rejected from enlistment, the public knew President Trump’s position, then and there.³

For people trying to judge the president, that kind of information is valuable because they will likely never see any material evidence of the president’s actions. This is not because people are duped or uniquely uncritical. It is just hard to observe the substantive effects of public policy. The median voter is not an applied economist, nor are they supplied with the kind of information that would help them make confident causal inferences, even if they were. So they rely on what the president’s actions signal, the attention it gets, and how it fits into existing narratives about the president’s political brand.

From the president’s perspective, this is why there are diminishing returns to allocating effort towards the substance of policy. Because political audiences cannot usually observe these effects, they rely on a policy’s symbolic content. If the president cares about both popularity and policy, there are circumstances in which they trade off substantive wins for symbolic ones. This is because the effort they would have invested in getting things done would net them less in terms of policy than the effort showing off does in popularity. This is consistent with models of political agency in which incumbents take welfare-reducing action to increase the odds of electoral success (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Herron and Shotts, 2001; Canes-Wrone, 2006; Judd, 2017).

We argue this has implications for presidential capacity, because the tasks required to develop policy differ from those required to showcase it, and thus, require different skills and expertise. Symbolic politics is sometimes thought of as costless, as if anyone could write a speech, set-up a press conference, prepare a venue, select an optimal roll-out timing, leak the right details to reporters, and more. But just as loyalty to a president’s goals is distinct from the ability to effectuate them, we argue the skills and expertise needed to make the president look good are also different. It requires different disciplinary training and work experience. To help presidents control the executive branch, they need individuals

³In this case, none of those substantive outcomes ended up happening (Lowande, 2024, 55-60).

with policy-area specific knowledge, as well as individuals with what Krause and O'Connell (2015) call "managerial competence"—those who have experience in public service, who have served in management roles, or who might have degrees and training in public administration and law. But competent administrators and policy experts can be shockingly inept at politics.

We argue that the types of human capital needed to build presidential capacity map onto what makes policymaking itself valuable for a president. Presidents want to hire both loyal and competent people, but there is more than one kind of competence. The people who can help the president change the doings of government are not synonymous with those who help them cultivate their image. This applies beyond personnel choices. Some offices in the White House do "real" policy work, while others simply gather feedback from favored constituents, and package what other parts of the government are doing. Likewise, people who have studied and served in presidential administrations have long pointed out that all organizational charts are not interchangeable or suited to the same purpose.

Although our argument generally applies to any organizational choice that affects presidential capacity, we narrow our focus to hiring decisions for the remainder of this study. Every political institution hires and retains staff, which makes comparisons trackable and instructive. It is difficult to find a comparable analogy to the organizational structure of the White House, because its occupant is a unique nerve center of American politics. As a result, most studies of structural choices in the presidential branch are comparative case histories. We can, instead, focus on a set of questions our argument provides relevant answers to, ones which also apply to other political institutions. Given our assumptions, who does the president hire?

First, the president will recruit people more ideologically proximate. In this respect, our theory does not diverge from existing studies. The White House is supposed to help the president *solve* agency problems with the rest of the federal bureaucracy, not create them. Moreover, regardless of the kind of talent or function performed, the people with similar preferences and aligned political fates will serve the president the best.

A second implication is that presidents will employ a mix of experts—both individuals with expertise that would aid the president in producing substantive accomplishments, as well as those who help them cultivate their image as politicians. Again, that expertise should be indexed by different disciplinary backgrounds and work experiences. When Donald Trump launched an initiative on HBCUs, individuals most suited to substantive policymaking would have experience working in education policy, and in particular, the kind who understand the grant and loan programs operated by the De-

partment of Education, which many small HBCUs depend on. A complementary strategy would be to hire lawyers experienced in the regulatory process. However, to ensure that the public knew he was helping HBCUs, Trump would need to hire people with different skills. People who understood how to put together events, press conferences, and materials that could be easily copied by journalists, people who understood political optics and messaging.⁴

Beyond the mere presence of this mixed-purpose staff, the relative value the president places on these staff should indicate the relative value presidents place on different kinds of capacity. It might be that the president employs a mix of substantive and symbolic experts, but the latter are small in number, lower in rank, and paid significantly less. Our argument would logically hold, but its scope and implications would be more limited. If, on the other hand, symbolic staff appear to be valued equally, or valued *more* than those with substantive competence, then the meaning presidential capacity is significantly altered, relative to the conventional view.

Our theory also has implications for a key outcome scholars point to as a sign of diminished capacity: turnover. Presidents build capacity for certain tasks by hiring people suited to those tasks. But not all expertise is portable—a general insight that applies both to the private sector and to political institutions like the U.S. Congress (Fong, Lowande and Rauh, 2024). The kinds of expertise the president needs are forms of human capital—some are general, while others are firm specific. In our case, it is clear that the expertise needed to craft a symbolically effective action for the president is general purpose. Many private firms, news organizations, and other political actors, can make use of someone with expertise in media and public relations.

On the other hand, most of the staffers suited to help the president control public policy have more narrowly applicable skills. Subject matter experts are typically hired to see to the details of policy initiatives. Their expertise is firm-specific because they have specialized in some area of policy the current president has prioritized. Managers are a different story. Presidents can certainly build capacity by hiring general-purpose managers from the private sector, who move freely from one industry or firm to the next, applying their management skills to the case at hand. However, the president also needs managers with rarer, and more specialized expertise in the administrative process. Moreover, the ethics rules typically prevent these staffers from moving into their most obvious vocation: lobby-

⁴The leaders of Trump's HBCU initiative were first Omarosa Manigault-Newman, a reality television star, and Jonathan Holifield, a former NFL-player and motivational speaker. Neither had worked in government.

ing. No rules, on the other hand, prevent staff with expertise in the symbolic from starting their own PR consulting firms, or from taking such a job at an existing firm. Many do this.

This leads to two related implications. The first is that the White House will have higher turnover than at will employees in the rest of the federal government and the U.S. Congress, *within a presidential term*. By “at will” employees, we mean political appointees directly removable by the president within the executive branch, and legislative staff, who can be terminated by their members for any reason. Political appointees outside the White House will tend to fill roles designed to enhance presidential control of the bureaucracy (a la Lewis, 2008). These officials will tend to have more firm specific human capital. Moreover, since jobs in the White House tend to confer more status than those in the rest of the federal bureaucracy, their outside offers will tend to be less valuable. Thus, it follows that these at will staffers outside the White House will remain in government longer.

The congressional labor market should have lower turnover, relative to the White House. Legislative offices are smaller organizations that, most often, have longer time horizons than the White House because their members are not term-limited. Because of their size, there is less specialization within offices. But that also means that legislative staffers must become proficient in a unique combination of tasks, which few other organizations value in the same way. In contrast, public relations and messaging staff are typically concentrated in leadership offices. It follows that those with expertise in symbolic politics will tend to have higher turnover than their more substantive counterparts. All White House staffers enjoy a status boost to their resumes, but relative to those who help presidents bolster the symbolic dimension of their accomplishments, the substantive staff have fewer outside options likely to pull them out of government.

We summarize these expectations in Table 1, which also compares those expectations with our best reading of existing theories. We say “best reading” because any synthesis like ours condenses the true diversity of viewpoints in a research area. In this case, moreover, there may not be explicit predictions offered by other views. As Table 1 shows, some of these expectations overlap. We build on existing theories to explain patterns not foreknown—or explained by—existing studies.

It is worth highlighting that from the perspective of both neutral competence and politicized administration, turnover is inherently problematic. Presidents would want to retain staff in order to see through the initiatives they begin. Follow through and institutional memory are important when there is no time for learning curves. In short, high turnover suggests low capacity for substantive governance. But high turnover does not imply a diminished capacity for symbolic governance. Public

relations staff and political strategists require less on-boarding, and their initiatives operate on shorter timelines. Their departure is less disruptive to the operations of the presidential branch.

Table 1 – Theories of presidential capacity and their implications for the WHO

	“Symbolic” Presidency	“Politicized” Presidency	Neutral Competence
<i>Staff preferences relative to the president...</i>	Proximate	Proximate	Mixed
<i>Staff expertise...</i>	Management, policy, & messaging	Management & policy	Management
<i>Staff turnover relative to other institutions...</i>	Higher	Lower	Lower
<i>Turnover of “symbolic” experts...</i>	Higher	–	–

Presidential capacity is not only about the ability to competently govern or pursue favored policies. It is also about helping the president remain popular. These are not identical goals that can be invested in, free of trade-offs. Some policies are zero-sum and precipitate political conflict, so neutral competence is not always possible. Likewise, producing a good policy is not guaranteed to make the president popular, because the president’s audience cannot observe it directly. The president must sink resources into advertising their accomplishments. This means that capacity in the presidential branch is not just a matter of substance and political control of government. It is also about symbolic politics.

Evidence

To investigate the implications of our theory, we use datasets constructed from personnel records of both the legislative and executive branches. We first introduce a dataset of White House staff from 1995 to 2024. Congress mandates the release of annual staff reports (P.L. 103-270) that include the names, salaries, and titles for all employees and detailees of the White House Office. This opens a unique window into who presidents hire. Before, the *U.S. Government Manual* included a partial accounting of White House offices and staff with no salary information.

Most annual reports were posted online by the White House, with exceptions. Reports from the

Clinton administration were only transmitted to Congress. We obtained them from the William J. Clinton Presidential Library. Additionally, the report from 2002 was never publicly released.⁵ There is no Senate record of it being transmitted. The House appears to have received the report but will not open these materials to the public until 2032, as per House Rule VII(3)(b)(4). The George W. Bush Presidential Library indicates that it has this report but estimates that fulfilling the FOIA request will take approximately 20 years, or around 2043. The report is typically ten pages and contains no sensitive personal information.

These White House reports have all the errors common to administrative records of this kind. Similar to congressional disbursement records, there are no unique identifiers. Names may be misspelled, written inconsistently, or changed after marriage. Additionally, the records do not include outside contractors and political consultants. Detailees may work for the president for a short period before returning to their agencies without ever appearing on a July disclosure.

In total, we identified 5,955 unique persons in the White House reports across 30 years, or about 12,874 staffer-years. Typically, 400-500 people work directly for the White House in any given year. President Biden had 530 people on average listed in his reports, whereas the Trump administration listed about 395 employees. The three Democrats in the series tended to employ more people than the two Republican presidents. The fact that one president might employ almost 30% more people than another illustrates how much discretion they have.

On their own, these records provide little help understanding who White House staff are and what they do. Therefore, we used a diverse set of supplementary sources to manually code characteristics of personnel at the time they joined the White House, including sex, race and ethnicity, age, education, and employment experience. We distributed random subsets of the personnel list among a team of researchers. Collectively, they spent around 1,400 hours between May and September 2024 using public search engines and social media platforms to match individuals to supplementary sources based on the names, titles, and dates of employment contained in the annual reports. Thousands of sources were used to construct the dataset, including social media profiles, alumni magazines, academic website directories, newspaper or magazine profiles, obituaries, wedding announcements, data aggregators, employer-published biographies, and interviews (SI Table A2). The manual coding process also cap-

⁵One hypothesis for this omission is that FY 2002 included the nascent Office of Homeland Security, which later became the Department of Homeland Security, and which would have ballooned the size of the staff employment report.

tured mentions of name changes to help link individuals across different reports.

Coding reliability varies with the availability of supplementary sources. Staff from the early days of the Internet have less of an online presence, compared with Millennials working in the White House today. We were more successful at locating information for staff who were employed more recently and paid more, as well as those who were Democratic and male (SI Table A1). Individuals for whom supplementary sources could not be identified were redistributed to another set of researchers for a second attempt. In total, we were able to identify the prior employment history for 79% of the unique individuals contained in the annual reports.

To examine the presidents staffing choices, however, we cannot rely solely on who eventually ends up working in the White House. We have to understand which candidates are selected from prominent hiring pools, and compare trends within the White House to other political institutions. For information on personnel in the U.S. Congress, we rely on disbursement reports released by the House and Senate. These reports can be transformed, after significant effort, into fairly detailed accounts of who worked in Congress, along with their office, title, and salary. We use commercially available data from LegiStorm, which extends back through 2001, as well as a dataset from Fong, Lowande and Rauh (2024), which covers the period from the second half of 2009 to the first half of 2022.⁶ For data on personnel in the rest of the executive branch, we rely on the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Enterprise Human Resource Integration (EHRI) personnel snapshots, originally provided to BuzzFeed News, but maintained and cleaned by Richardson (2023). These provide quarterly snapshots of most federal bureaucrats from 1973-2014.⁷

Linking individuals between personnel records is a challenge. Studying the movement of staff between Congress, the White House, and the rest of the executive branch requires identifying staffers referenced in each, without a unique identifier. For most staff, matching fields include first name, last name, and middle initial. Matches can also be excluded by inference. For example, at-will staff almost never cross party lines. A staffer making \$80,000 per year in 1996 will not reappear as a part-time intern in 2016. An employee cannot work for both Congress and the White House simultaneously.⁸

⁶Although both datasets draw from the same set of reports, the latter is supplemented with records from staff training events and has undergone more extensive cleaning to identify and remove duplicates. Additional details on the aggregation procedures and potential sources of error can be found in the cited work.

⁷Notably, the White House is excluded from these records.

⁸The only exceptions are some staffers for the Vice President, which Congress pays for with legislative disbursements. These officials do not appear in the White House disclosure reports.

We identified 1,416 unique people who worked in both Congress and the White House, or about 24% of the full White House roster.⁹ This is an under-estimate because the White House personnel records begin in 1996, while the best congressional records begin in 2002. For the 2010-2020 period, about 29% of WHO staffers have congressional work experience. This would be closer to the true figure, if one assumes movement between the branches has been constant over time. Notably, prior work experience in the rest of the federal government is less common for White House staffers, at about 22%, based on our hand-coded work experience.

Our approach to examining the empirical implications of our argument has four parts, which we present in order of the predictions summarized in Table 1.

Staff Preferences

We first examine the ideological makeup of White House staff. To achieve policy wins—whether symbolic or not—presidents need to hire officials with similar preferences. We find strong evidence that the White House staff approximates the preferences of the president.

We take stock of these staff preferences several ways. It is worth noting, first, that presidents almost never hire outside their party. Only 139 White House staffers over this period served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, all of which, were in clerical or ceremonial positions. There is also not a single staffer with prior political work experience (e.g., other elected officials' offices, campaigns, PACs, or national committees) outside the party of the president.¹⁰ These facts are consistent with expectations, but ultimately, a coarse measure of staff preferences. Past employers provide more detailed information about the ideological proximity of potential hires. Indeed, work experience is used by those selecting White House personnel to assess their policy preferences, as well as their expertise.

We examine the two common public employers—the federal bureaucracy and Congress. For the former, need a measure of elite perceptions of the ideological leanings of various agencies. Fortunately, such a measure has been developed by Richardson, Clinton and Lewis (2018*b*), based on a 2014 survey

⁹To link staff across institutions, we relied on a combination of string-matching and hand-coding. After dropping all punctuation, staff were assigned a name identifier that spells out their last name, first name, and middle initial, without spaces. Perfect matches across personnel records were checked for duplicates, then assumed to be accurate. For the remaining unmatched White House staffers, we generated a list of all possible congressional matches within one string distance. These were then hand-coded. A majority were discarded for having different middle initials, or being similar but distinct names. The most common matches in the list were records that excluded a middle initial for one personnel report. Most matches could be verified with public LinkedIn pages.

¹⁰There are a handful of records managers and travel agents who started as unpaid interns in Congress.

of federal executives. Do presidents tend to select staffers who worked in agencies thought to be more politically aligned with their administrations? Figure 1 suggests the answer is “yes.” We plot perceptions of prior employers among White House staff for Democratic and Republican presidents, showing consistent and large differences (or about 0.25 stan. dev., $p < 0.001$). It is more common for Democrats to hire staff who used to work in the Education department, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Labor, whereas Republican presidents tend to hire from Defense, Homeland Security, and Treasury. Naturally, this might indicate differences in presidential agenda, with Republican presidents emphasizing those with expertise in different policy areas, relative to Democrats. Note, however, this expertise signal will be inseparable from the ideological one. Elites are aware that people who tend to agree with the mission of an agency select into those jobs.

Figure 1 – Presidents hire staff with experience working in ideologically friendly agencies. Plots the ideology of prior employers among White House staff for Democratic (blue) and Republican (red) presidents, using Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis’ 2018*b* measure of perceived agency ideology. About 21% of staffer-years had prior experience in a federal agency, and of those 85% worked in an agency rated.

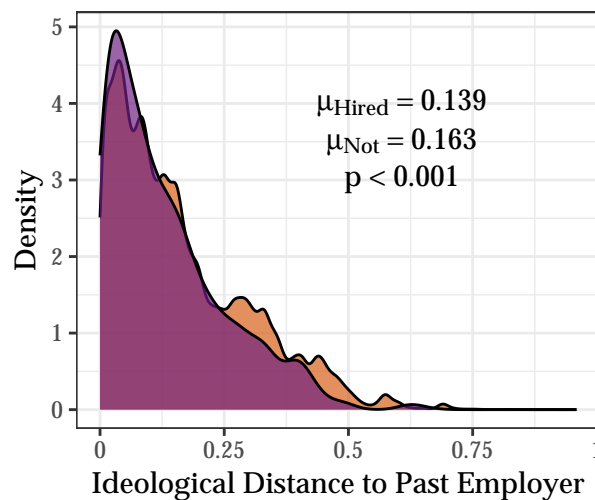


Former congressional staff provide a cleaner test because they are at will employees whose employment is tied to a politician, and thus, an ideological position. They also change employers more often than civil servants with job protections. In expectation, the distribution of former congressional bosses should look like it was drawn from a president attempting to identify staff with similar policy preferences.

To examine this, we construct a staffer-year dataset for all congressional staff who served in either personal, committee, or leadership offices from 2002-2023—at total of 129,324 unique individuals, and

466,912 staffer-years.¹¹ To render this dataset comparable to White House data, we summarize each staffer-year as of July 1. For each individual, we have records of all offices that paid the staffer, and can use this information to identify the member of Congress most directly identifiable as their boss. Personal and leadership staff are assigned the member who holds that office, whereas the majority and minority committee staff are assigned the chair and ranking member (Stewart and Woon, 2011; Eldes, Fong and Lowande, 2024).¹²

Figure 2 – Presidents tend to hire co-partisan staffers who worked for ideologically proximate members of Congress. Plots the absolute distance between congressional staffers who were (purple) and were not (orange) later hired by the White House and the president, using the absolute distance between the Commonsense DW-NOMINATE score of the president and the member of Congress directly responsible for hiring. Opposition party staffers are excluded from this plot.



Staff who go on to work in the White House tend to have worked for members more ideologically proximate to the president. Presidents never hire opposite party staffers. But, as Figure 2 shows, they also tend to hire ideologically proximate staffers *within* their party. The difference in mean ideological distance is about 0.18 stan. dev. of the within-party variation. Presidents tend to look like their caucus median, so in substantive terms, this means they tend to avoid hiring from their caucus extremes—meaning, in terms of all of Congress, from both the moderates and far left or right. Of course, these

¹¹In our data, no congressional support staff (e.g., sergeant at arms, informational technology, etc.) have been hired by a White House.

¹²Using these rules, 85.5% of non-support staff can be tied to a member. Some committee staff, however, are not labeled as part of the minority or majority. For these staff, we assign them majority or minority status using the political party of their current or future employers, which increases our coverage to 92.2%. The remaining staff cannot be linked to a member and are dropped from analyses that include Commonsense scores.

differences do not account for differences in the staff make-up, expertise, or the temporal ordering of employers.

Therefore, we estimate the effect of the ideological distance on hiring and report these results in Table 2. Our dependent variable is being hired by the White House in the following year. There are two distinct ways to answer this question, each offering slightly different interpretations. In one set of results (models 4-6), we include staffer and year fixed effects, so all effects should be thought of as within-staffer comparisons. In a second set (models 1-3), we exclude staffer fixed effects. The former tells us what staffers might acquire to make themselves more attractive to the White House, while the latter tells us which staffers are more likely to be drawn from Congress, relative to their peers at any particular point-in-time snapshot. For both sets of results, we include log-transformed salary, position seniority, job type and expertise, and whether the staffer changed jobs within-year.

Table 2 – Presidents tend to hire co-partisan staffers who worked for ideologically proximate members of Congress. Reports coefficients and cluster-robust standard errors (at the staffer level) for least square regressions, in which the dependent variable is being hired in the next year by the White House. The baseline probability of being hired the following year is 0.006. All models include year fixed-effects, log-transformed salary, position seniority, job type and expertise, and whether the staffer changed jobs within-year.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Hired by the WH Next Year $\in \{0, 1\}$					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Commonspace Distance	-0.0006 (0.0004)	0.0026* (0.0015)	0.0054*** (0.0017)	-0.0031*** (0.0004)	-0.0009 (0.0013)	-0.0021 (0.0017)
Co-Partisan		0.0025** (0.0011)	0.0061*** (0.0014)		0.0016* (0.0009)	0.0003 (0.0015)
Distance \times Co-Partisan			-0.0096*** (0.0024)			0.0037 (0.0030)
Individual-level Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Person FE				✓	✓	✓
N	426,666	426,666	426,666	426,666	426,666	426,666

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 2 largely confirms the ideological homophily suggested Figure 2, but adds an important caveat. Presidents hire from within their party, and among those co-partisan staffers, from the offices more proximate to the president. In the cross-sectional analysis, the relative effect of co-partisanship is an over 40% increase in the odds of being hired. But, the interactive effect reported in model (3)

demonstrates that co-partisan status can be quickly lost, the farther the staffer's former boss is from the President—about 21% relative reduction for every stan. dev. away they work. This basic story, however, does not always hold within staffer, where changes in control of the presidency and co-partisanship seem to primarily drive hiring. This might indicate that WH hiring managers have a long memory. In other words, for individual staffers, moving from a distant to a more proximate office does not seem to undo the effect of earlier bosses. This is consistent with a truism on the Hill, which is that staffers pick a partisan side early and can expect that identity to stick with them for the rest of their careers.

In summary, we find consistent evidence to support both the symbolic and politicized presidency theories. Presidents hire staff with employment experience that reflects their own policy preferences, whether those preferences are mirrored in Congress or in the rest of the administrative state.

Staff Expertise

We next examine the expertise of staff hired by the White House. This expertise will help us understand the kind of capacity presidents build. It also provides the most direct distinctions between our argument and others. If our theory is useful, we should see presidents making significant investments in symbolic capacity—in the kind of human capital that helps them credit claim and advertise. Moreover, the degree to which they emphasize this kind of capacity over others will be instructive. It tells us how they see their strategic problem, and what kind of policymaking they prepare to undertake.

This, of course, requires some measure of expertise in symbolic politics. Following Krause and O'Connell (2016), we focus two key indicators of competence: education and prior work experience. To understand what skills the president and his closest aides prioritize, we examine what they looked like on paper when they were hired. We collected not only educational attainment, but also the degree field of staff, and identified the following specialties as messaging and communications-related: journalism, writing, communication, English, literature, marketing, graphic design, advertising, digital media, hospitality, public relations, speech, reporting, rhetoric, theater, radio, aesthetics, event planning, campaigning, advocacy, film, theater, and drama. This likely under-counts communications-related training in degree plans, as the most frequent college major for White House staff is political science, and there is little political science instruction that focuses on the mechanics of governing.

We also define classes of prior work experience as useful for symbolic politics. This includes

jobs in advertising, speech-writing, media relations, journalism, publishing, blogging, public relations strategy and consulting, public organizing and engagement, event planning, advance scheduling and travel, campaigning, and political advocacy. Since many job titles are not sufficiently descriptive, we also defined some employers as relevant work experience, regardless of job title: publishers, news organizations, and political consulting or public relations firms.

Figure 3 plots trends in staffers with communications-related profiles for the White House. The first and most obvious thing to note is that the share of staffers with what we define as work experience related to symbolic politics is on the rise. While around 20% of WH staffers had this on their resumes during the Clinton administration, in the Biden administration, the same figure was around 40%. Some initial skepticism is warranted. These figures are based on who our team could find public records of, and people from the 1990s are harder to find. Our initial skepticism, however, was allayed for two reasons. First, this kind of work experience is, by definition, more public-facing than others. Staffers with this kind of career trajectory should be easier to find, which would bias the earlier estimates upward. Second, there is not secular increase in relevant degrees—despite the proliferation of public relations and communications-related masters degree programs. The missingness of biographical information should bias the frequency of these degrees upward earlier in the time series, while the secular increase in supply would do the same to the latter part of the series. For these reasons, we think the increase in relevant work experience is not an artifact of our data collection procedure.

Another notable stylized fact is that the share of current personnel with communications-related job titles (medium purple) is essentially flat. These are individuals whose jobs involve communications, media, photography, correspondence, advance travel, speech-writing, political affairs, and public liaising. Today, around 30% of the White House staff help the president with their public-facing operations, at least on paper. Notably, this is significantly higher than most congressional offices. The only comparable figure comes from recent developments in the offices of Congress' party leaders, which aligns with what Lee (2016) has found.¹³ Overall, these new facts are consistent with our argument: presidents invest a significant share of their total FTEs the capacity for symbolic politics—more than is typically acknowledged, and significantly more than what appears on the organizational chart of the

¹³Of course, titles can be deceptive. Many White House staffers have generic titles like “special assistant” that do not describe what they actually do. Likewise, even substantive-sounding titles like “deputy director” might mask the de facto jobs associated with political messaging. Moreover, if the purpose of the White House staff is partly to create the impression that the president is influential and accomplished, titular advertisement of the fact may be ill-advised.

WHO.

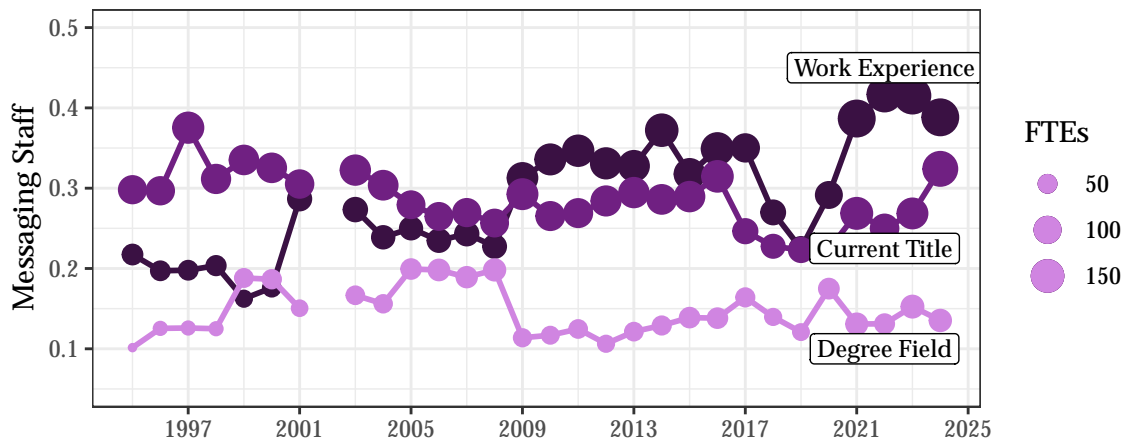


Figure 3 – A large and growing share of the President’s staff have expertise in messaging. Plots the percentage of WH staffers with messaging-related degree fields (light), with current job titles related to messaging (medium), and with relevant prior work experience (dark). Dot size is in scaled by the count of staffers within that year, so this figure also depicts the secular growth in the WH staff over time. These figures are calculated using comparable July personnel snapshots. See our earlier discussion of these data for an explanation for the missingness of 2002.

These figures, however, cannot tell us much about the *relative* value presidents place on this kind of expertise. Expertise in policy, management, and symbolism are not mutually exclusive, and these figures only speak to the makeup of the WH staff, not the potential set of hires it could have made. Therefore, we return to examining staff movement from Congress to the White House, using the same basic research design and modeling from the previous section. We have shown that presidents select more ideologically proximate staff. Among those staff, what kinds of work experience are they prioritizing—what enhances a staffer’s odds of being poached by the White House?

We use congressional staffers’ job titles to index this work experience, defining three categories of roles: policy, law, and communications. Following Fong, Lowande and Rauh (2024), we classify professional staff members, advisers, policy analysts, senior strategists, legislative assistants, legislative aides, legislative correspondents, legislative fellows, chiefs of staff, budget analysts, budget directors, chief clerks, economists, and policy directors as “policy-related” positions. For lawyers, we identified those with the title of counsel, legal advisor, and attorneys. For communications staff, we identified those with titles that included communications, special events, engagement, outreach, special interests coordinators, press, media, and digital relations, speechwriters, and public affairs. Because our data are, again, structured by staffer-year, these indicators are not mutually exclusive. Staff might move

jobs within year, or have a job that references more than one role. Each variable is, thus, the proportion of the staffers' title which falls into each category.

As Table 3 shows, presidents seem to value communications-related experience among congressional staffers. Any of the positions we single out have an edge over those who manage district offices, do secretarial work, handle constituent service, or are interns. Between staffers (models 1-3), those in policy-related positions have over a one-standard deviation increase in the odds of being hired by the White House. Importantly, however, the magnitude of this effect is doubled for communications-related positions, and tripled for those in legal counsel roles. In each of the between models, there is some evidence that the effect of being in policy and communications roles are not equivalent ($p = 0.059$).

Most importantly, however, when we examine the within-effect of changing roles (models 4-6), moving into (or out of) a communications position is the only estimate that can be signed by convention. Moving into a full time communications role is associated with a more than one-standard deviation increase in the probability of being hired. In these models there is only weak evidence that the effect of being in policy and communications roles are not equivalent ($p = 0.182$).

A potential concern with these comparisons is that communication roles are under-supplied in Congress, relative to what we have classified as policy roles. Moreover, because legislative offices are smaller, individuals are less likely to specialize, and may perform some communications related duties, even if their titles say otherwise. However, our analysis avoids purely conflating staffer status with their positions by accounting for salary and whether an official held a title indicating seniority (e.g., deputy or director). Moreover, we think that the equilibrium behavior of the White House in a congressional labor pool with fewer distinct communications staffers is instructive. The within-staffer effects suggest that these roles are a means of staffers distinguishing themselves, which fits our basic argument about what presidents value.

Table 3 – Presidents tend to value congressional staff in communications roles. Reports coefficients and cluster-robust standard errors (at the staffer level) for least square regressions, in which the dependent variable is being hired in the next year by the White House. The baseline probability of being hired the following year is 0.006. All models include year fixed-effects, log-transformed salary, position seniority, job type and expertise, and whether the staffer changed jobs within-year.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Hired by the WH Next Year $\in \{0, 1\}$					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Policy	0.0026*** (0.0007)	0.0026*** (0.0007)	0.0028*** (0.0007)	0.0008 (0.0006)	0.0008 (0.0006)	0.0007 (0.0006)
Law	0.0078*** (0.0018)	0.0078*** (0.0018)	0.0071*** (0.0020)	0.0011 (0.0021)	0.0012 (0.0021)	0.0019 (0.0023)
Communications	0.0052*** (0.0012)	0.0052*** (0.0012)	0.0047*** (0.0012)	0.0026** (0.0011)	0.0025** (0.0011)	0.0020* (0.0011)
Commonspace Disance			✓			✓
Co-Partisan		✓			✓	
Individual-level Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Staffer FE				✓	✓	✓
<i>N</i>	466,912	466,912	426,666	466,912	466,912	426,666

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

These findings shed light on the relative value of certain kinds of experience at the individual level. When presidents staff the White House, they bring in a significant and increasing proportion of employees with experience in public relations and messaging. And within an important labor pool that comprises around one-fourth of WH staff backgrounds, they seem to value these skills at least as much, and perhaps slightly more, than policy experience.

Staff Turnover

Finally, we examine our argument's implications for staff turnover. In general, the conventional view in public management is that executive office turnover damages a chief executive's capacity for top-down control. To succeed in changing policy, the president needs a stable team to formulate and oversee the implementation of new initiatives. High turnover, on the other hand, is not necessarily anathema to symbolic politics, as communications strategies are general and require less institutional knowledge and learning.

There are different ways to define turnover. Turnover might be the proportion of year t staff who

were not working in year $t - 1$, or the relative size of staff who are recent hires. It might also be the proportion of staffers in year $t - 1$ who are no longer working in year t , or the relative size of the staff who leave. Finally, it might be the proportion of year t staff who have never worked in a previous year. In practice, we've found that these figures differ only slightly from year to year, and point to the same basic stylized facts. Thus, what follows, turnover in year t is the proportion of staffers in year $t - 1$ who are not working in year t .

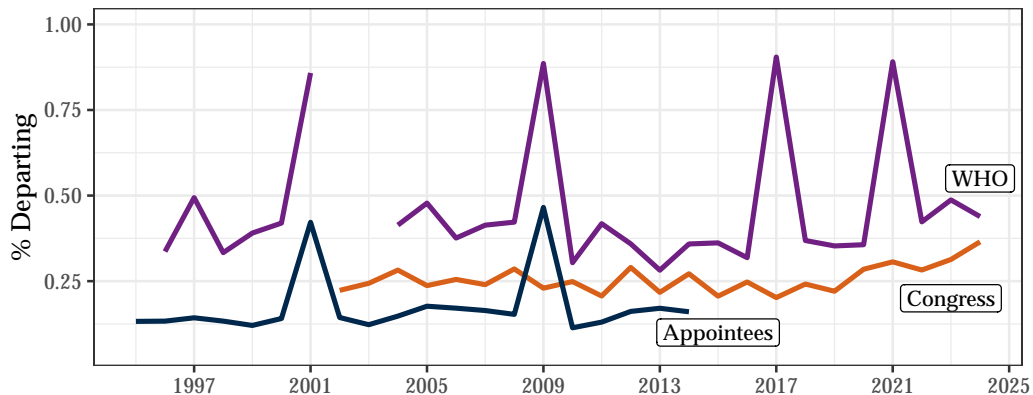


Figure 4 – Even within presidential terms, turnover in the White House is higher, relative to Congress and the rest of the executive branch. Plots turnover in the White House office (purple), all non-support congressional offices (orange), and all executive branch employees who received political appointments (non-career SES, Schedule C, and PAS). These figures are calculated using comparable July personnel snapshots. See our earlier discussion of these data for an explanation for the missingness of 2002.

We plot turnover trends in Figure 4. The most obvious fact is that executive branch turnover is punctuated by presidential transitions—especially in the White House. There, about 88.5% of staff leave. Those remaining occupy non-political support roles like calligrapher or telephone operator.¹⁴ More astounding, however, is that intra-administration turnover is still very high, at about 38.7% on average. The figure is two percentage points lower if you take into account “new” hires who have worked in the White House previously, and two percentage points higher if non-political staff are excluded. Relative to the private sector, these turnover figures put the White House on par with the construction and manufacturing industries.¹⁵ They also make the White House an outlier among the rest of the at-will employees of the executive branch. Among political appointees outside the White

¹⁴If you exclude these non-political positions, turnover is 95%, which may indicate our way of classifying positions as “non-political” is under-inclusive. Most anecdotal accounts imply turnover is 100%.

¹⁵See: “Job Openings and Labor Turnover - January 2023,” BLS, USDL-23-0434, March 8, 2023.

House, yearly departure rates are 44.4% for presidential transition years, and 14.6% for non-transition years. Contrary to stylized accounts of presidential transitions, a large proportion of political appointees remain in government for at least the first six months after a presidential transition. Some continue to serve the next administration as at will employees, while others transition into roles with civil service protections.

Most importantly, White House turnover consistently exceeds congressional turnover, which averages 25.6% for all non-support staff. Personal offices tend to have slightly lower turnover, while committee staff tend to see roughly equivalent turnover. There are no years in the series in which White House staff turnover is lower overall than Congress. The only subset of congressional staffers that see higher turnover are those that work for chamber leadership (at 30.2%). In short, turnover in the White House is high, both in absolute terms, and relative to political institutions where high turnover is seen by scholars as undermining the capacity to govern.

Finally, we examined the odds of turnover for staffers more suited to the symbolic presidency. Here, we find only partial support for our expectation that these staff would be more likely to depart. Overall, it is true that these staff have higher departure rates. People with experience, training, or current job titles related to public relations (i.e., as shown in Figure 3) have year to year departure rates of 55%, which is higher than most other staffers. This pattern matches public relationships and press officials in the rest of the federal government.

However, as we show in Appendix C, at the individual level, communications experience or current role does not consistently predict departure. Depending upon the choice of model, data structure, and inclusion of variables, one can obtain results that show this kind of expertise increases, decreases, or has an uncertain relationship with longevity (SI Table B1). On the whole, there is weak evidence that those with communications-related experience actually remain slightly longer, on average (SI Table B2). We hesitate to interpret these findings *ex post*. But many of the staffers coded as having experience in symbolic politics are those who came in from the presidential campaign. These staffers tend to make up a larger share of the WH staff early in the term, and over time, are replaced by people with experience in government.

Symbolic Capacity: Specialization or Trend?

One important consideration is what the staff makeup of the rest of the Executive Office of the President may indicate about the aforementioned findings. It might be the case, for example, that presidents in recent years have simply specialized. That is, in the White House, they emphasize symbolic capacity, while in the rest of the EOP, they emphasize substantive policymaking. This would not be inconsistent with our argument. But it would suggest that presidents' have not *devalued* substantive expertise, on the whole, only that they have distributed it elsewhere.

Fortunately, the OPM data can shed some light on these questions. There are some stylized facts that suggest specialization. First, there have always been relatively few public-relations positions in the EOP, and they have been falling since 2001 (SI Figure C3). As of the most recent data, there were just five individuals with public affairs related jobs. Moreover, patterns in hiring cannot speak to what hired individuals are now capable of doing. It is increasingly clear that the Office of Management and Budget, in particular, exercises more control over budgeting and rule-making than it did, even just ten years ago (Bose and Rudalevige, 2020).

At the same time, the rest of the Executive Office has not matched the growth of the White House over this period, and still poses fundamental trade-offs because of the job protections still enjoyed by most of its staff. The number of FTEs at both the OMB and EOP have declined gradually over the years (SI Figure C1). Today, for example, the OMB has about 200 fewer employees than in the 1980s, a trend which is reversed in the White House. Moreover, both the OMB and EOP are still staffed mostly by career civil servants, and the number of political appointees has not significantly risen over the period (SI C1). In short, there is no secular increase in the “politicization” of the EOP in terms of staffing and appointments (a la Lewis, 2008).

These trends are instructive alongside those in the White House office. If presidents have indeed specialized—investing in the credit-claiming and advertising functions in the White House office, and emphasizing substantive policymaking in the rest of the EOP—then they have made an important trade off. By relying on the capacity of the EOP for substantive policymaking, they have also accepted the potential agency problems introduced by officials with civil service protections. Practitioners seem to know this. In a chapter of the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 planning document, Russell Vought laments the traditional sway career officials have had over the operation of OMB.¹⁶ Moreover,

¹⁶For example, he writes: “It is vital [...] political staff, not the careerists, drive these offices in pursuit of the President’s actual priorities and not let them set their own agenda based on the wishes of

this kind of trade-off supports our basic argument, as it shows presidents have sought to bring “in-house” the symbolic functions of the office, not the substantive.

Discussion

Presidents need institutional capacity to fulfill their office. Their most immediate and flexible choices are about who to hire, especially within the White House. If they were only interested in maximizing their capacity for bureaucratic control and achieving desired policy objectives, they would invest in loyal staff with policy expertise and experience in public management. They would retain them as long as possible, because institutional memory facilitates the effective implementation and oversight of new initiatives.

Presidents do indeed appear to bring in staff who share their preferences, but the expertise and longevity of this staff are difficult to explain with conventional arguments. We find that a substantial proportion—close to half, most recently—come in with work experience related to the more public-facing and symbolic aspects of politics, not experience in governing. We find, moreover, that the White House is remarkably transient. Its annual, within-administration turnover nears 40%. Finally, we find that alongside these developments of the last few decades, the rest of the EOP has not grown or become significantly more politicized. In some respects, the American presidency looks like the “incapacitated” Congress.

We see these and other patterns as indicative of a broader strategic logic in the American presidency. Presidents, we argue, are keenly aware that they are judged on the basis of their perceived accomplishments, and that they invest tangible government resources to foster these perceptions (Lowande, 2024). They care both about controlling policy, and controlling the public narrative surrounding it. In this way, our study revises what it means for presidents to “politicize” the presidency. Contemporary presidents develop their symbolic capacity, just like members of Congress (e.g., Lee, 2016). They are driven to invest scarce resources in messaging and credit-claiming.

Our study has implications for the study of executive branch policymaking, and for the separation of powers, in general. We have only examined trends in hiring and staff experience, without attempting to examine the effect of presidents’ capacity-building on subsequent performance and behavior.

the sprawling ‘good government’ management community in and outside of government. Many Directors do not properly prioritize the management portfolio, [...] such neglect creates purposeless bureaucracy that impedes a President’s agenda”(Project, 2023, 48).

It is reasonable to ask whether more experienced and less transient staff would, as expected, lead to higher quality policy. These questions have been considered outside the White House, but not within it (e.g. Gallo and Lewis, 2012). But here, researchers have yet to leverage an evidentiary advantage. Every past presidential administration is awash in paper records, which, when properly processed, allows researchers to track the production and implementation of policy at a level of granularity not available for other institutions.

Our data also naturally lead to questions about representation, which have also been asked in scholarship on congressional capacity (e.g., Ritchie and You, 2021). It has long been thought that the diversity of the people who make up organizations impacts their decisions. As the supposed helm of the executive branch, the White House staff may impact decisions made by the president, but also those who have access and influence. Moreover, future work might examine when former White House staff move into federal agencies, legislative offices, advocacy groups or lobbying organizations.

Finally, by considering presidential capacity alongside Congress, our study complements recent work that demonstrates the development of Congress and the presidency are historically linked (e.g., Dearborn, 2021). Here, we've shown that the capacity for messaging is important to contemporary presidents, just as recent party leaders in Congress seem to emphasize the same kind of capacity.

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Supplementary Information

Presidential Capacity

Kenneth Lowande and Nicholas Birdsong

Table of Contents

A. Coding procedures and reliability (SI-2)

B. Individual-level predictors of staff turnover in the White House (SI-10)

C. Executive Office capacity over time (SI-11)

A Coding procedures and reliability

Section 6 of Public Law 103-270 (Independent Counsel Reauthorization Act of 1994) requires the President to provide reports to Congress that list the name, title, and rate of pay for each employee and detailee of the White House Office. Reports are released on July 1 each year, with limited disclosure exemptions for national defense or foreign policy purposes. Copies of these reports were obtained through the National Archives and other official government websites, including [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov). Data from the annual White House staff reports were supplemented by information collected through a series of public database searches. Data collection efforts took place between May and September 2024, with coding performed by this paper's authors and eight other graduate and undergraduate student research assistants.

A.1 Coding Instructions and Random Assignment

Each coder was provided an identical set of instructions that specified how data were to be collected and recorded. We tested the clarity of these instructions by supplying an initial trial sheet to each coder. These trial sheets consisted of an identical random subset of 39 White House staff. After our coders each completed this exercise, we noted any inconsistencies in how staff were classified, collectively discussed potential problem areas, and clarified guidelines accordingly.

Each member of our team was then assigned randomized subsets of the compiled White House staff list to manually code according to the supplied instructions. To encourage fidelity to the instructions between different coders, our team held weekly or bi-weekly meetings to discuss potential questions, challenges, problems, or strategies. Coders were also encouraged to communicate regularly through a dedicated project message board. In addition, we randomly distributed duplicate entries across the subsets of staff members assigned to each coder to further assess inter-coder reliability. Analysis of inter-coder reliability was conducted using the `ura` package for R.¹⁷

A.2 Search and Staff Identification

We initially relied on matching names to identify if staff listed across different years' reports were the same individuals. This approach resulted in false matches or double-counting errors related to name

¹⁷Goehring B. Improving Content Analysis: Tools for Working with Undergraduate Research Assistants. *PS: Political Science & Politics*. 2024;57(1):57-63. doi:10.1017/S1049096523000744

changes, spelling and transcription errors, individuals with identical names, and similar irregularities. These errors were corrected through manual identification by our coders.

Coders were instructed to leverage the name, title, and year information from the annual reports to identify supplementary data sources through public online databases. The manual search and identification section of the coding instructions directed researchers to begin by searching Google for individual staffers' names as listed in the annual White House staff reports. If relevant results were not immediately identified, coders were instructed to experiment with different combinations of search terms, such as including or excluding the staffer's middle initial and trying common shortenings of the name, like "Joe" for "Joseph." Coders were also instructed to try other combinations of relevant search terms, such as adding the specific presidential administration, the position title, or "white house" (in quotations).

If information on a staff member could not be located within 10 minutes, or a complete record in 15 minutes, coders were instructed to move on and indicate that the record is incomplete. If a coder came across an image of an individual but did not fully verify that individual's identity, they were instructed to conduct a reverse image search to find other potential websites with additional information. Data sources utilized for manual coding included social media profiles on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook; alumni magazines and academic website directories; newspaper or magazine profiles; wedding announcements; employer-published biographies; and recorded interviews.

Individual coders appeared to demonstrate some variation in their initial aptitude for searching and locating relevant data, although these differences diminished after the pre-coding trial sheets. For the trial sheets, all coders had matching values in 46.2 percent of cases for a binary variable that indicated an incomplete or missing record for a given staffer. In other words, for over half of the records during the initial trial coding period, at least one coder was able to find a complete record and at least one coder was not. The proportion of staff in each coder's identical trial sheet marked as incomplete ranged from about 35 percent to zero. Consistency across coders increased to 88.1 percent for the duplicates contained in the subsequently distributed subsets of staff used in this study. Missing or incomplete entries were redistributed for a second attempt by a different coder.

Missing and incomplete information likely does not occur at random in this dataset. We examined this possibility using a logit model to find the likelihood of a coder expressing uncertainty about any information or had difficulty identifying or labeling variables for a given staff member. The results in Table A.1 show that, holding all other variables in the model constant, missingness was less common

for staff who were 1) paid a larger share of the total White House staffing budget for a given year compared to those who were paid less, 2) worked in the White House in more recent years as compared to earlier years, 3) worked for a Democratic administration as compared to a Republican one, and 4) were not female as compared to those who were female. The second model incorporates a race variable from the `predictrace` package, which gives the racial category most often associated with White House staffer’s surname in U.S. Census data.

Table A1

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	uncertain	
	(1)	(2)
Salary Share	-0.600*** (0.063)	-0.610*** (0.067)
Year	-0.062*** (0.004)	-0.061*** (0.004)
Republican	0.351*** (0.060)	0.354*** (0.064)
Female	0.247*** (0.060)	0.297*** (0.064)
Pr.Race Asian		10.088 (184.328)
Pr.Race Black		10.874 (184.328)
Pr.Race Hispanic		9.742 (184.328)
Pr.Race White		10.168 (184.328)
Constant	123.420*** (7.701)	111.349 (184.517)
Observations	10,236	8,943
Akaike Inf. Crit.	7,610.352	6,709.237

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

A.3 Data Sources

For some individuals who were listed in the annual reports, no supplementary sources could be identified. For others, a single source may have only contained partial information. In these cases our coders would record multiple URLs as supplementary sources for a single individual. In total, our team recorded 10,004 URLs that were used to manually construct our dataset.

Social media websites were most commonly identified supplementary sources, accounting for about 73% of all web pages used to construct our data. Nearly 98% of the social media websites,

and 65% overall, are from LinkedIn. Other sources include Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and X/Twitter, as well as photo hosting websites like Alamy.com and Shutterstock.

Biographies published online by employers accounted for the second-most common supplementary source type. These included law firms, government affairs offices, federal and state agencies, newspapers, think tanks, and universities, as well as membership directories such as those maintained by state bar associations or speaker booking agencies.

Figure A.1 lists the number of URLs from various types of sources. Each source category is mutually exclusive such that a single URL is counted as only one type, although some of the web pages likely could have been categorized differently. For example, the obituary category included those published by news organizations, as well in memorium pages published by former employers and those contained in alumni magazines or newsletters.

Data aggregators include websites that compile information from other public sources, such as Rocketreach, Opensecrets.org, and Radaris.com. Online encyclopedias include both collaborative wikis as well as more traditional collections like Britannica.com. The events category includes conferences, commencement speaker announcements, and similar sources. Academic works includes information derived from journal letterhead or author bios contained within the work itself, and includes peer reviewed articles, books, law journals, senior theses, or grey literature published by industry groups or think tanks. Mistakes in this categorization method are likely present, but it should provide a mostly accurate general sense of the range and distribution of supplementary sources information.

Table A2

Category	Count
Social Media	7333
Employer Biographies	1120
Aggregators	242
Online Encyclopedias	867
Historical Websites	104
Government Reports	64
News	547
Alumni News, Magazines	396
Obituaries	97
Blogs	25
Sports Records	4
Events	63
Academic-like Work	42
Weddings	48
Personal Websites	51
Awards	2
Podcasts	25

A.4 Gender

We used a combination of manual verification and the `predictrace` statistical package in R to determine if a staff member is more likely female (1) or not (0). This package assigns gender probabilistically, based on the proportion of names assigned female in a dataset from the United States Social Security Administration.¹⁸

Upon manual review by our team of coders, thirteen staff were identified as incorrectly classified by `predictrace`. Eleven entries marked as not-female were identified as female, while two marked as female were identified as not-female. Each of these staff members were reclassified based on the results of the manual review. Additionally, one former staffer who was probabilistically indicated as male based on her first name identifies as trans-female.

A.5 Ethnic-Racial Identity

Each White House staff member identified within the dataset was categorized by our coders into one of nine broad racial or ethnic categories. These categories included Asian or Pacific Islander, South Asian American, Black or African American, Latino, Middle Eastern or Arab American, Native American or American Indian, White, two or more races, or other.

¹⁸Tzioumis, Konstantinos (2018) Demographic aspects of first names, *Scientific Data*, 5:180025 [dx.doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2018.25]

Coders were instructed to categorize a White House staffer as South Asian American if their heritage could be traced back to “the Indian subcontinent, which includes the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.” The Asian or Pacific Islander category included Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese, and Malaysian. Middle Eastern or Arab American included Arab, Armenian, Iranian, Turkish, Israeli, and Kurdish. Individuals were categorized as Latino if of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. Americans of Native American descent were categorized as Native American or American Indian. Coders were instructed to categorize non-Hispanic or Latino Americans of European descent as White. Americans of African descent were coded as Black or African American.

If individuals identified with two or more categories listed above or were multiracial, instructions directed coders to categorize the staffer as “Two or More Races,” then separately list the race and ethnicities. Coders were instructed to use the “other” category sparingly, only if the coder was certain that the individual is non-white but cannot categorize them with another label.

Race and ethnic identification for staffers was either explicitly described by a source or inferred by our coders from an individual’s name, image, or other contextual information.

Coders demonstrated a high degree of consistency in coding the ethnic and racial identity of staffers. Coders were 81.6 percent in agreement for the initial trial sheets, with a Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.83 (ratio of observed disagreement to all possible disagreements). Agreement increased to 100 percent for the duplicates randomly distributed throughout the coding sheets. Coders maintained 77.8 percent agreement for both the test sheets and duplicates (Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.87). Coders were able to discern specific racial or ethnic identity in only nine of the duplicate or test cases, combined.

A.6 Education

Coders were instructed to record six variables related to each staffer’s educational background. The highest degree earned was recorded as either high school, some college, bachelor’s, master’s, juris doctor, or doctorate. We recorded the major field of the highest degree, with the instructions specifying that each holder of a juris doctor would be in the field of law. The instructions directed coders to record the name of the college a staffer attended to obtain their highest degree earned. Coders also captured separately both the year an individual graduated with a bachelors or equivalent degree and the year

that an individual graduated with their highest degree. Lastly, we recorded whether an individual went back to school after working in the White House. With the exception of the education post-White House variable, all education-related variables are contemporaneous to the start of an individual's entry into service at the White House Office.

Inter-coder reliability checks demonstrated a high degree of consistency for education-related variables. Coders all agreed for the highest degree earned variable in about 83 percent of tested cases, 77.5 percent for education field, 79.3 percent for education post-White House, and 88 percent for identifying the year a staffer graduated with a bachelor's degree. Some coders initially experienced confusion about the highest degree earned category in the test sheets by misinterpreting the variable to include degrees earned after their hiring. Agreement was only 67.7 percent. However, attempts to clarify coding categories appears to have improved consistency, with later duplicates demonstrating an agreement for this variable of 79.3 percent.

A.7 Birth Year

Coders were instructed to note the year in which an individual was born, if able to be located. If unable to locate an explicitly stated reference to an individual's age, coders were told to approximate it using arithmetic. For example, if a wedding announcement in 2015 listed a staffer's age as 32, their year of birth would be recorded as 1983, even though this may be off by one year depending on the month of a person's actual birth relative to the announcement. If coders could not locate either an explicit record of an individual's birth year or their age at a given point in time, the instructions had coders subtract 22 from the year an individual earned their bachelors or bachelors equivalent based on the assumption that most individuals with a bachelor's degree graduate high school 18 years after birth and immediately enroll in a four-year degree program.

Birth year values were largely consistent between coders after the initial test period. When looking at exact matches, coders all found the same value in 86.7 percent of cases in the coding sheet duplicates. Although trial sheets had only a 47.2 percent agreement rate, the Krippendorff's alpha was 0.78. Further, coders disagreed on average by 1.5 years overall. When looking at duplicates in the sheets coded after the initial trial period, 7.5 percent of the disagreements between coders were by a difference greater than a 1 year.

A.8 Work Experience

We recorded the job title and employer name for each staffer's position preceding their employment in the White House across three categories: political, public, and private. Political employment included prior work for a political action committee, interest group, member of Congress, member of a state legislature, political campaign, or similar entity. Public employment included work for a state, federal, or international government agency. Private employment included work for a law firm, bank, lobbying firm, for-profit or non-profit corporation, non-governmental organizations, or similar entities. We included internships as well as traditional full-time employment, so long as it was an individual's highest position in a given category. We considered all university employment as private. As with the education-related variables, coding instructions directed our team to record work experience for individuals prior to the start of their time working in the White House.

Categorization of prior employment history demonstrates the greatest degree of inconsistency compared to other variables in our dataset, which hints at possible issues with data quality for these variables. This was mostly due to differences in how coders interpreted categories, and how prior employment experience may have been differently characterized or omitted based on the source of information about a supposedly comprehensive account of a staffer's job history. One example of disagreement in the initial test sheets involved characterizing experience for former legal counsel in the U.S. House as political or public. Coders held regular discussions online and in meetings about the correct categorization of various employers and employer-types, such as whether the World Bank is a private or public employer. To correct these, the authors went through every uniquely inputted employer and fixed mis-categorized data.

Discussions and periodic clarifications to coding instructions likely improved the data quality over time, especially as compared to the initial test sheets. We performed inter-coder reliability tests, but due to differences in the descriptions of job titles and employers we converted each category into dichotomous variables to investigate if a given staffer was described as having prior employment experience in a given category similarly across coders. In the initial test sheets, agreement ranged from 51.4 percent in the political employment category, 54 percent in both the the public and private employment categories. Agreement increased in the subsequently coded sheets to 75 percent, 80.6 percent, and 58.3 percent, respectively.

B Individual-level predictors of staff turnover in the White House

We hypothesized that staff who represent the president’s “symbolic” capacity would be more likely to depart, because their experience tends to be more general. To investigate this, we first generated a staffer-year level dataset with departure the following year as a dependent variable. Because our data cover 1995–2024, and exclude the year 2002, we must necessarily exclude the years 2001 and 2024. Table B1 reports the results of least squares regression with standard errors clustered at the staffer level. Following our congressional hiring analysis, we report both within and between models. Across staffers, it appears that those with any kind of communications experience or training may be slightly *less* likely to depart, on average, relative to others.

This relationship does not hold within-staffers. Models 3 and 4 estimate the effect of staffers moving into and out of communications-related job titles in the White House, since communications training and prior experience does not vary within staffer. Here, the estimate is the opposite sign, but not precisely estimated.

Table B1 – In panel data predicting departure from the White House, there is no consistent association between communications experience and departure. Reports coefficients and cluster-robust standard errors (at the staffer level) for least square regressions, in which the dependent variable is leaving the White House in the next year. Unit of analysis is staffer-year. The baseline probability of departing next year is 0.48. All models include year fixed-effects and year variables, and also control for the number of years until the next presidential transition, and whether the staffer held a non-political title or title that indicated they were in a legal counsel position. Model 2 includes demographic controls: educational attainment, sex, ERI, age, salary share, and whether the record indicated the staffer was a detailee. Model 4 includes demographic controls: age and salary share, and whether the record indicated the staffer was a detailee.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Departing Next Year			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Communications Experience	-0.0132 (0.0123)	-0.0254** (0.0115)		
Communications Position			0.0285 (0.0269)	0.0245 (0.0306)
Position Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls		✓		✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Staffer FE			✓	✓
N	9,018	7,651	10,378	7,655

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

We also report a simpler analysis: a single cross-section of all unique White House staffers, predicting the total number of years in service. To render staffers more comparable, we control for the year the staffer was first hired, and the number of years from that year until the next presidential transition. (This still does not eliminate all time-related sources of error, as some staffers work in multiple administrations, and so enter and exit in multiple periods.)

This analysis reveals something else notable. Staffers with communications experience tend to arrive earlier in a presidential administration (0.18 years earlier, $p < 0.005$). In general, earlier cohorts of White House staffers tend to be drawn from the political campaign, and as a result, much of those staffers occupy communications-related roles. Over time, these officials tend to be replaced by staffers with more experience working in government.

Table B2 – Communications experience is associated with 8-11% longer tenure in the White House. Reports coefficients and conventional standard errors for least square regressions, in which the dependent variable is the log-transformed number of years a staffer appears in the White House roster. Unit of analysis is staffer. The median staffer 2 years in the White House, while the most common number of years is 1. Model 2 includes position controls: whether the staffer held a non-political title or title that indicated they were in a legal counsel position. Model 3 includes demographic controls: educational attainment, sex, ERI, age, salary share, and whether the record indicated the staffer was a detailee.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Logged-transformed Years of Service		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communications Experience	0.0996*** (0.0158)	0.1133*** (0.0159)	0.0846*** (0.0181)
Position Controls		✓	✓
Demographic Controls			✓
<i>N</i>	5,120	5,120	4,148

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

C Executive Office capacity over time

The White House Office is not alone in the so-called “presidential branch.” The rest of the Executive Office of the President (EOP) complements its capacity, most notably, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The following figures present descriptive evidence of their capacity. The OPM data are structured as quarterly snapshots. We average each of the following figures by year for the purpose of visualization. Figure C1 plots its total numbers of FTEs over time. Figure C2 plots the proportion

of those staffers who are political appointees. Figure C3 plots the number of staffers who are in public affairs related jobs.

It is also worth noting that over this period, the proportion of EOP staff with advanced degrees has linearly increased over time. We think this reflects secular trends in the labor market, as well as hiring practices in the federal government, rather than intentional effort to enhance the capacity of the EOP.

Figure C1 – Staff headcounts have declined at the EOP and within OMB over time. Plots the average headcount of staff at the Executive Office of the President (EOP) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB, which is within the EOP). Counts are based on the number of unique pseudo-identifiers provided by OPM.

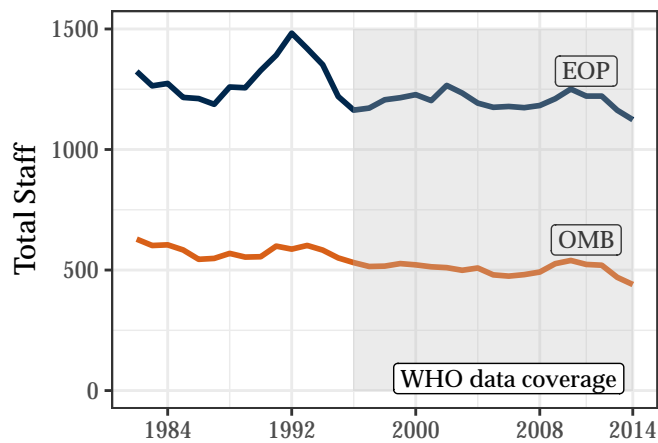


Figure C2 – Most EOP officials are not political appointees. Plots the average proportion staff at the Executive Office of the President (EOP) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB, which is within the EOP) who are political appointees (e.g., non-career SES, Schedule C), by year. Counts are based on the number of unique pseudo-identifiers and job classifications provided by OPM.

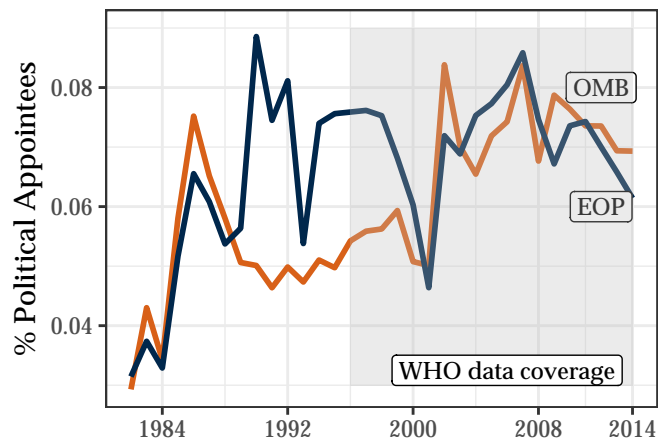


Figure C3 – The EOP has very few public-affairs related positions, and they have declined in recent years. Plots the average headcount of staff with a PR-related job (i.e., communications, public affairs, visual information, writing, and editorial assistance) at the Executive Office of the President (EOP) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB, which is within the EOP). Counts are based on the number of unique pseudo-identifiers and job descriptions provided by OPM.

