



Significant Cabinet-level turnover after a president’s re-election highlights the need for 2nd-term transition planning

November 6, 2019

Experienced federal leaders, policy experts and historians have long focused on the monumental challenges associated with forming a government after a new president is elected. One of the biggest hurdles involves making about 4,000 political appointments, including more than 1,200 that require Senate confirmation.

But second-term presidents also must focus on political appointments, and in particular be prepared for significant turnover in critical leadership jobs following their re-election.

An examination of about 60 important leadership positions—Cabinet secretaries, deputy secretaries and undersecretaries at 15 major departments—shows that many were vacated at various points following a president’s re-election, either by choice or because the president wanted a change in leadership and fresh ideas.

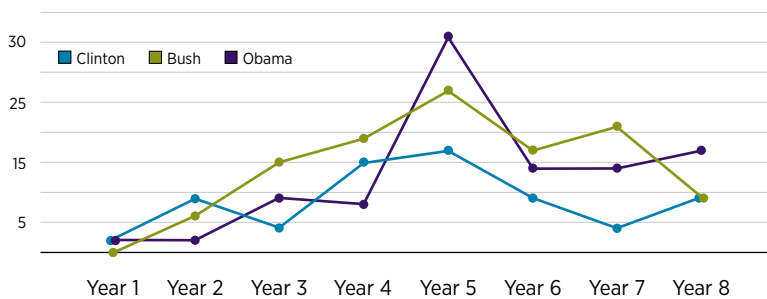
The new data compiled by the Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition shows that from Election Day through the first six months of the second terms of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, an average of 43% of their Cabinet secretaries, deputy secretaries and undersecretaries left their jobs. On average, 9% left prior to Inauguration Day and 34% left during the first six months of the second term.

During this period between the election and the early months of the second term, five Cabinet secretaries left the Clinton administration, eight departed the Bush administration and seven left the Obama administration.

In total, 463 appointments across the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations were tracked.¹

¹ Some appointees were promoted from one Senate-confirmed position to another. For the sake of this study, a promotion was considered a continuation of service and not a new appointment or resignation. See the methodology for more details.

NUMBER OF RESIGNATIONS OF TOP SENATE-CONFIRMED APPOINTEES BY YEAR

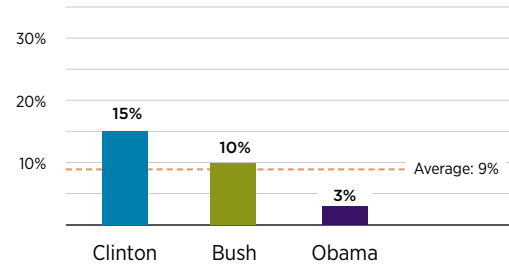


Note: Does not include appointees who served until the end of the administration or beyond. Top Senate-confirmed appointments include those in the 15 Cabinet-level executive branch departments at the levels of secretary, deputy secretary and undersecretary.

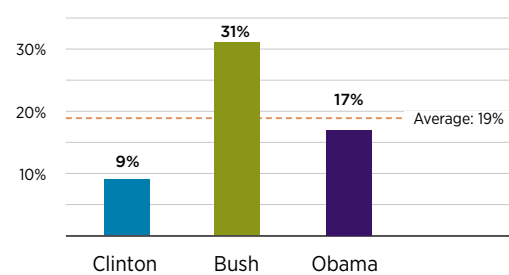
PERCENT OF TOP SENATE-CONFIRMED APPOINTEES WHO RESIGNED NEAR THE START OF THE 2nd TERM

Appointments in 15 Cabinet-level executive branch departments at the levels of secretary, deputy secretary and undersecretary

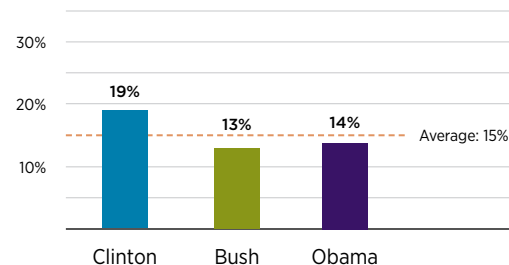
Resigned between Election Day and Inauguration Day



Resigned between Inauguration Day and 3 months into 2nd Term



Resigned between 3 to 6 months into 2nd Term



Note: Appointees were counted as serving during the transition period if they were confirmed at least 6 months prior to the 2nd inauguration and served through at least Election Day. On average, 57% of appointees continued to serve beyond 6 months into the 2nd term.

Few first-year appointees serve until the end of the administration

The vast majority of the high-level politically appointed jobs examined have been traditionally filled by presidents during their first year in office. However, presidents cannot expect those early appointees to serve deep into their administrations.

For the past three administrations, an average of only 11% of high-level appointees served until the end of the second term.

In fact, an average of 44% of individuals holding these jobs left office at various stages of the first terms of the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. As a result, many of the earliest officials in these positions were no longer around to share their experiences in the second term.

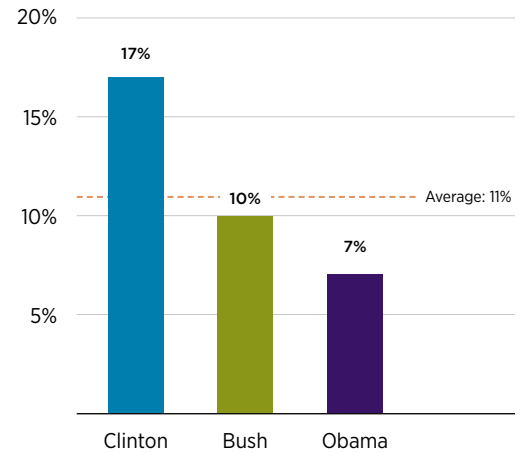
The Partnership for Public Service and The Washington Post maintain a database of President Donald Trump's appointments for more than 700 key positions. The database shows the number of appointees confirmed by the Senate, the progress of candidates as they go through the nomination and confirmation process, and the jobs for which there is a vacancy and no nominee. The appointee database is located at wapo.st/2JUQP12.

Conclusion

The need for effective pre-election planning is acute for presidential hopefuls because of the large number of political appointees and the extraordinary challenge associated with staffing an entirely new administration. Recent history also shows that one of the key challenges for a second-term administration is to prepare for significant turnover among the highest-level government positions.

Although a second term in many respects represents a continuation of the previous four years, it offers a chance for a recalibration and a new start that requires serious preparation long before Inauguration Day. Even though the likely turnover of key personnel presents a challenge for an incumbent administration, it also provides the opportunity for a president to bring in individuals with fresh ideas and new energy.

PERCENT OF TOP 1ST-YEAR POLITICAL APPOINTEES WHO SERVED UNTIL THE END OF THE ADMINISTRATION



Note: Only includes Senate-confirmed positions that were appointed during the 1st year of each administration from the 15 Cabinet-level executive branch departments at the levels of secretary, deputy secretary and undersecretary.

About the Center for Presidential Transition

The Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition serves as the premier nonpartisan source of information and resources to help presidential candidates and their teams lay the groundwork for a new administration or for a president's second term.

The Center provides critical assistance on how to organize and execute a transition; helps agency career executives prepare for new political leadership; provides political appointees with insights on the unique aspects of government leadership; and engages with Congress to promote transition reforms. In addition, the Center offers insights to help incumbent presidents prepare for a second term, and provides advice on the steps needed for a smooth transfer of power in the event that a new president is elected.

Methodology

This study, conducted in November 2019, includes high-level presidential appointments for 15 Cabinet-level executive branch departments for the previous three administrations—secretaries, deputy secretaries and undersecretaries. The study includes the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labor, State, Interior, Treasury, Transportation and Veterans Affairs. In total, 463 appointments from 1993 to early 2017 were tracked.

Dates for appointments and confirmations were collected from official government sources. Dates for resignations were compiled from official sources or national media outlets when possible. Otherwise, dates were collected from the best public data available.

Some appointees were promoted from one Senate-confirmed position to another. For the sake of this study, a promotion was considered a continuation of service and not a new appointment or resignation. For example, Paul Schneider served as Under Secretary for Management in the Department of Homeland Security from Dec. 2006 to June 2008. He then served as Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security from June 2008 to Feb. 2009. For this study, Schneider was counted as a single appointment in Dec. 2006 and a single resignation in Feb. 2009. Exceptions were made if an individual was appointed by different presidents or if there was a gap between their times of service. In those instances, each appointment was counted separately.

The study only includes presidential appointments requiring Senate confirmation. Therefore, for a person in a non-Senate-confirmed position who moved to a Senate-confirmed post, only their time and appointment to the Senate-confirmed job is included. Individuals were counted as serving during the second inauguration period if they were in office six months prior to the second inauguration and served until Election Day or beyond. This was done to account for appointees who chose to resign near the completion of the first term, but did not wait until the start date of the second term.