



Effective Transition Planning Can Help Presidents Have a Successful Year One and Year Five

Preparing for the enormous responsibility of running the federal government is the most important job for any presidential candidate.

For both new administrations and those beginning a second term, advanced transition planning is essential for achieving policy successes, delivering for the American people and creating a strong start for the next four years in office.

Preparation is always crucial, yet the current coronavirus pandemic reinforces the need for effective planning and the importance of being ready to respond effectively to crises that can range from natural disasters and health care emergencies to matters of national security and economic instability.

While Congress and campaigns have acknowledged the importance of early transition planning for a new presidency, less attention has been devoted to planning for a president's potential second term.¹ Many presidents have accomplished signature priorities in the first year because they used the transition period to plan how they would deliver quickly on campaign promises. Fifth years, however, have not been nearly as productive. Previous second-term presidents have missed opportunities for early victories because most have minimized the need for advanced planning.

Year One: Ensuring a Strong Start

Despite early obstacles and a steep learning curve, the first year of many administrations are often among their most productive. Newly elected presidents typically enjoy a short honeymoon and a surge in popularity. Transition teams that carry out the planning needed to take advantage of these favorable conditions have frequently been successful in delivering early victories.

The importance of good transition planning

The start of a new presidency can be challenging. New administrations must make approximately 4,000 presidential appointments, about 1,200 of which require Senate confirmation. In addition, presidents must staff the White House and prepare policies and budgets while overseeing more than 100 federal agencies, a workforce of two million civilian employees and more than two million active duty and reserve military personnel. All of this must be done while transitioning from a campaign mindset to one of governance. Since the time between Election Day and inauguration is slightly more than 70 days, planning for these responsibilities must begin long before voters go to the polls.

Harrison Wellford, a veteran of transition efforts for President Jimmy Carter and President Bill Clinton, explained, "You have a series of action-forcing deadlines that come up against you like freight trains...for a brand-new administration that hasn't done any of this before, these are intimidating challenges."²

Transition planning better prepares administrations for staffing and management matters while allowing presidents to focus on bigger issues. Immediately after his election in November 2008, President-elect Barack Obama, together with President George W. Bush, faced a growing financial crisis that demanded most of both the outgoing and incoming presidents' attention. Because Obama's transition

¹ Congressional Research Service, "Presidential Transitions: Issues Involving Outgoing and Incoming Administrations," RL34722, May 2017.

² Martha Joynt Kumar, George C. Edwards III, James P. Pfiffner, Terry Sullivan, "The Contemporary Presidency: Meeting the Freight Train Head On: Planning for the Transition to Power," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 30(4), Dec. 2000, 755. DOI:10.1111/j.0360-4918.2000.00142.x. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2IZ0MKu>

team was already working on management planning, the president-elect was free to focus on the economy. The director of Obama's transition team, Chris Lu, stated that "the last thing he [Obama] wanted to think about was all the day-in and day-out stuff with the transition and he didn't have to." Effective planning was "one of the advantages of having a very smooth transition," Lu added. "He obviously had more important issues on his plate."³

For George W. Bush, effective and efficient planning was especially critical because his transition was shortened to 38 days due to the disputed election results in 2000. Bush assembled a transition team with previous executive branch experience, including Dick Cheney, a former secretary of defense and White House chief of staff, and Andrew Card, a former Cabinet secretary and deputy White House chief of staff. This veteran team allowed the new administration to "get right down to business," according to Joe Hagin, Bush's deputy chief of staff.⁴ Thanks to building an experienced transition team, "we knew all the basics that allowed us to at least walk from the first day rather than crawl."

In contrast, a bungled transition effort can undermine the start of a new presidency. As senior Carter aide Stuart Eizenstat warned, "transitions can be perilous if not handled well."

3 Martha Joynt Kumar, "The 2008-2009 Presidential Transition Through the Voices of Its Participants," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 39(4), Dec. 2009, 846. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-5705.2009.03710.x. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2xQd99x>

4 Martha Joynt Kumar, "Getting Ready for Day One: Taking Advantage of the Opportunities and Minimizing the Hazards of a Presidential Transition," *Public Administration Review*, 39(4), Jun. 2008, 603. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-6210.2008.00900.x. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/38WQ1mJ>

According to Eizenstat, "the road for the incoming Carter administration was especially difficult and [a poor transition effort] laid the groundwork for many of its problems..."⁵

Presidents have attained many of their greatest achievements during their first year

From Clinton's deficit reduction act in 1993 to George W. Bush's tax cuts in 2001 to Obama's stimulus package in 2009, recent presidents have won some big legislative victories early in their tenures. In addition, presidents have used executive orders to quickly deliver on key campaign promises.

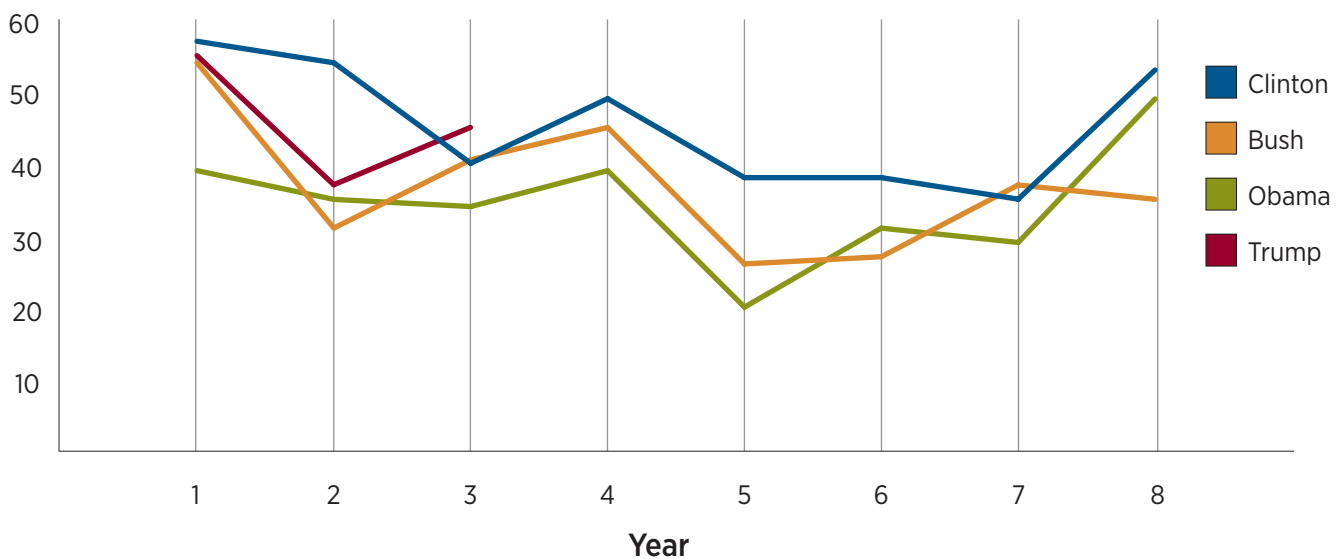
For example, Obama signed nine executive orders in his first 11 days, addressing issues central to his campaign like the detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Clinton and Bush each issued more than 50 executive orders in their first years, more than any other year during their two terms. President Donald Trump issued 55 in his first year, the first of which came just hours into his presidency.

Why have presidents been able to secure some of their biggest accomplishments so early? Successful presidents take advantage of their early honeymoon period. As political scientist Martha Kumar wrote, "For a short while, the president has the goodwill and attention of the public and the Washington community. Even in politics, people do not want to attack the newcomer until there is substantial reason to do so."⁶

5 Stuart Eizenstat, "President Carter: The White House Years," St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2018.

6 Martha Joynt Kumar, "Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power," Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

Executive orders by year in office



Note: Year 8 includes the final weeks in January for each president before the inauguration of a new president.

Incoming presidents tend to experience a boost in popularity between Election Day and their inauguration. Clinton, Bush and Obama, for instance, each saw significantly higher job approval ratings on day one compared with their percentage of the popular vote when elected.

Share of popular vote and presidential approval ratings during their first days in office			
	Percentage of popular vote	Gallup job approval in first days in office	Gallup job approval rating near day 100
Clinton	43.0%	58%	55%
Bush	47.9%	57%	62%
Obama	52.9%	67%	65%
Trump	46.2%	45%	41%

Voting data comes from the American Presidency Project's "Presidential Elections Data." Available at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections>

Survey data comes from Gallup's "Presidential Job Approval Center." Available at <https://bit.ly/3bfwXSC>

First-year presidents have two other incentives to move quickly on their agenda. First, presidential appointees secure Senate confirmation faster in year one than any following year.⁷ From 1981 to 2019, Senate confirmation of presidential appointments in a president's first year has averaged 61.7 days, about 18 days faster than any other year. Second, the president's party traditionally has more support in Congress than they will after the next midterm election.

Since 1934, the party of all sitting presidents has lost seats in either the Senate or the House in their first midterm election, with only one exception: George W. Bush's midterm election in 2002.

Taking advantage of these favorable conditions requires careful and early transition planning. Without a clear policy agenda, effective staff in agency leadership positions, advance planning for legislative and executive action, and other elements of a transition effort, new presidents may find their first year less than productive.

While most recent presidents had success soon after taking office by using their transitions to take advantage of favorable conditions, the same cannot be said of how recent presidents have planned for a second term.

⁷ Partnership for Public Service, "Senate Confirmation Process Slows to a Crawl," Jan. 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/3b2vEFS>

Year Five: Lack of Transition Planning Leads to Less Productivity

In many ways, the fifth year of a presidency should be one of the most productive. Winning reelection is recognition that the voting public generally supports how a president served during the first term. As political scientist Michael Nelson wrote, "The second-term president...is free from the cares of reelection politics that many presidents regard as an impediment to doing the best job possible."⁸

Two-term presidents, however, have tended to treat the start of their second term as a continuation of their first term rather than a moment to renew their administration and re-evaluate their goals.

Josh Bolten, George W. Bush's chief of staff during his second term, said "every two-term presidency has had the same problem, which is the president doesn't think of it as a transition."⁹ Bolten added Bush was hesitant "to think about a second term, even in victory, as a moment of transition" even though he was encouraged to do so.

Senior Obama officials described similar hesitancy. Denis McDonough, Obama's deputy national security adviser during his first term and chief of staff during his second term, acknowledged, "I did not think about it as a moment of transition and I don't think we as a team did."¹⁰ Another senior official in the Obama administration seconded the idea in an interview with the Partnership for Public Service: "You would think this would be an opportunity for us in the White House to do strategic planning. We didn't."

By treating the start of a second term as a time for change instead of the maintenance of the status quo, a two-term president may be able to minimize issues that have hampered fifth-year productivity in previous administrations.

As Bolten advised, those that do not plan fully for a second term are facing "a huge lost opportunity for an administration to relaunch itself, to refresh its personnel and to attack its policy agenda with the same vigor that the administration did in year one of its presidency."¹¹

Presidents face significant challenges in the second term

Why have presidents struggled to be productive during their fifth year? Despite coming off a reelection victory, presidents starting their second term have faced several major challenges.

⁸ Michael Nelson, "2013 and Beyond: Barack Obama and the Perils of Second-Term Presidents," in "The Elections of 2012," CQ Press, 2014.

⁹ Partnership for Public Service and The Boston Consulting Group, "Presidential Transition Guide," to be released May 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nicole Ogrysko, "No matter the upcoming election outcome, time to start preparing for presidential transition," Federal News Network, Nov. 7, 2019. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Wpk2IY>

Staff turnover

After winning reelection, recent administrations have experienced significant staff turnover. A report by the Partnership for Public Service found that 43% of high-level Senate-confirmed appointees serving on Election Day resigned within six months of the start of a second term.¹² During that same period, five Cabinet secretaries left the Clinton administration, eight departed the Bush administration and seven left the Obama administration.

This level of staff turnover can hinder the ability to create and implement policy. The exit of officials also decreases institutional knowledge and creates more challenges for the sitting administration.

However, turnover is also an opportunity if a president's team plans effectively for a transition to a second term. Another four years in office, with many new people in positions of leadership, offers a chance for a recalibration led by individuals with renewed energy and original ideas.

"Newness is a good thing," said McDonough, who advised second term administrations to look for "new legs" and a "fresh perspective."

"The moment, even in victory, is a moment to think about the staff and the Cabinet from the beginning," Bolton added. "Good advice is 'seize the opportunity.' Assume you're going to win, but treat it as a transition and make sure you're prepared to hand off in good shape in case you don't."¹³

12 Partnership for Public Service, "Significant Cabinet-Level Turnover After A President's Re-Election Highlights the Need For 2nd-Term Transition Planning," Nov. 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/3b8bBGo>

13 Partnership for Public Service, "Peaceful Transition of Power," Jan. 2020. Available at <https://presidentialtransition.org/peaceful-transfer-of-power/>

Congress becomes more difficult

Another challenge for presidents in their fifth year—and in fact their entire second term—is that interactions with Congress become more difficult. An incumbent's party generally has fewer seats in Congress and the Senate takes longer to confirm their nominees.

While the president's party usually wins seats the year the president is reelected, they still have fewer seats in year five compared with the first year. Since 1981, the president's party has had an average of 26 fewer seats in the House and two fewer seats in the Senate in their fifth year than in their first year. As a result, presidents starting their fifth year will likely have more difficulty translating their recent electoral victories into legislative success compared with a president just entering office.

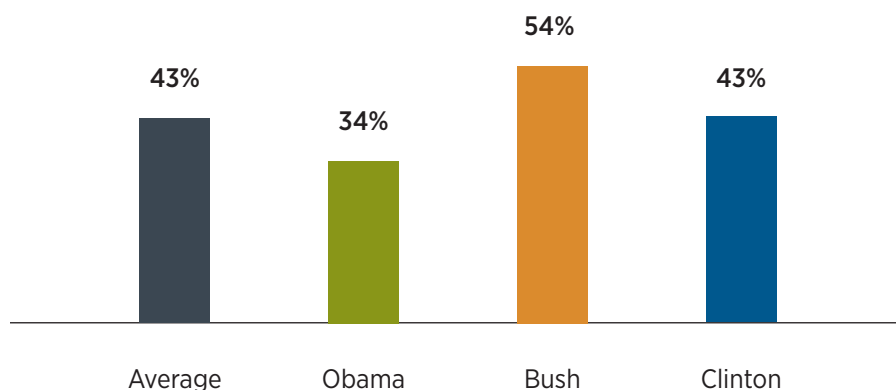
This challenge becomes even greater later in the second term, especially after the midterms following their sixth year when the president's party almost always loses more seats in Congress. Since 1981, every second-term president has lost seats in the second midterm election except for one. On average, second-term presidents lose 10 seats in the House and five seats in the Senate. The only exception was Clinton, whose party gained four House seats in 1998.

In addition, Congress has added to the difficulty facing second-term presidents by taking longer to confirm their presidential nominees. Since 1981, Congress has taken an average of 92.6 days to confirm presidential appointments during a second term compared with 76.8 days during a first term.¹⁴

14 Partnership for Public Service, "Senate Confirmation Process Slows to a Crawl," Jan. 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/3b2vEFS>

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



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 this point.

Tough issues have been postponed

Another challenge for presidents entering their fifth year is that they have already dealt with many of the promises of their campaign. What remains are policy goals that are difficult to accomplish.

As Michael Nelson wrote, “During the second term, problems that were postponed from the first term because they were so controversial or intractable as to jeopardize the president’s reelection come back to haunt the administration.”¹⁵

For example, George W. Bush’s attempt to reform Social Security was an instance where he decided to wait until after reelection to move forward a key campaign promise.¹⁶ Obama waited until his second term to initiate new rounds of negotiations with both Cuba and Iran, in part because the negotiations were politically sensitive.¹⁷ President Ronald Reagan signed the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty with the Soviet Union, a move that was viewed by some in his conservative base as a betrayal.¹⁸

Recommendations for a second term

Political victories for presidents in their fifth year are not impossible, even if they are rare. During his fifth year, Clinton secured the bipartisan passage of the Children’s Health Insurance Program, reducing the number of uninsured children. George W. Bush won passage of the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act, which included a major overhaul of the country’s bankruptcy laws. These examples tend to be the exception as most presidents struggle to win significant victories early in their second term.

Treating the start of a second term as a transition, and not just the continuation of a first term, could help avoid the pitfalls that have undermined previous presidencies. Presidents and their staff should begin planning for a second term months before Election Day. Despite the likelihood of facing significant turnover in key positions and strong political headwinds, proactive planning can help presidents become more productive in the early days of their second term and be better positioned to achieve their long-term goals.

George W. Bush’s Chief of Staff Andrew Card advised, “I think it’s important you not [wait to] start your planning for a second term until after you’ve won the right to have the second term. If you wait that long to start your planning, you’ll probably be about six months late before you can implement it.”

As Bolten and the rest of the Center for Presidential Transition’s advisory board summarized in an open letter, “...planning for a second term is also critical. Every second term administration benefits from fresh eyes and fresh legs. Every second term president experiences significant turnover and an important policy window after the election. Therefore, effective planning is essential given the inevitable turnover, a Senate confirmation process which unfortunately is taking longer, and the fact that the fifth year of a president’s tenure typically provides a window for bipartisan policy development.”¹⁹

15 Michael Nelson, “2013 and Beyond: Barack Obama and the Perils of Second-Term Presidents,” in “The Elections of 2012,” CQ Press, 2014.

16 The Brookings Institution, “Why the 2005 Social Security Initiative Failed and What it Means for the Future,” Sept. 2005. Retrieved from <https://brook.gs/3b8B7LC>

17 Warren Strobel & Lesley Wroughton, “Secret Talks in Canada, Vatican City led to Cuba Breakthrough,” Reuters, Dec 17, 2014. Retrieved from <https://reut.rs/2QsBV66>. Associated Press, “A Timeline of Key Events in US-Iran negotiations,” Nov. 25, 2013. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3dagkZU>

18 Hendrick Smith, “The Right Against Reagan,” The New York Times, Jan. 17, 1988. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/38VWxdi>

19 Partnership for Public Service, “Open Letter from Bipartisan Center for Presidential Transition Advisory Board,” Jan. 20, 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/2U1EJDj>