

The 2020–21 Presidential Transition

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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The transfer of presidential power is always a difficult process, but the 2020–21 transition from Donald Trump to Joe Biden was particularly arduous due to a combination of crises facing the country. This included the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic downturn, a nationwide reckoning on race, the outgoing president’s unwillingness to accept the election results and the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Trump’s refusal to concede the election led to a delay in ascertainment—the formal decision that initiates the government’s post-election financial and substantive support for the winning candidate. In addition to delaying funding and access to federal agencies, some members of the Trump administration were not fully cooperative with the incoming Biden team, further complicating matters.

The United States ultimately upheld its long tradition of the peaceful transfer of power on Jan. 20, 2021, and Biden began governing immediately with a substantial foundation of planning and personnel in place. This was in large measure due to months of preparation taken well in advance of the election, including contingency planning and the tireless efforts of many career agency officials.

Nonetheless, the events of 2020–21 revealed longstanding areas of fragility in the presidential transition process.

In previous transitions, some practices have been determined by law. Other major elements have been governed by norms and traditions. Sitting administrations helped a new administration prepare to take office regardless of party. It is not a law, for example, that outgoing administrations ask their political appointees to resign at the end of the president’s term. But most recent administrations have done so to save the incoming administration from having to make such a request.

While the Trump White House met the statutory transition planning requirements during the preelection period, the lack of clarity and in some instances lack of cooperation from the administration after the election exposed areas where the norms and precedents were not enough to fully prepare for the transfer of power.

This report offers a detailed examination of the planning and execution of the 2020–21 presidential transition from the perspective of the Biden transition team, the incumbent administration and the federal agencies, with recommendations for future transitions.

Our findings reflect significant improvements to the presidential transition process created by a series of amendments to the federal transition law since 2010, and highlight areas requiring attention:



The role of an incumbent administration in a transition is as important as the work of the incoming team.

Post-election events in 2020–21 demonstrated the potential for incumbent presidents seeking reelection to impede or fail to provide support for planning by their opponent. For future elections, Congress can reduce the potential for conflict and lost time by amending the Presidential Transition Act to ensure that a delay in ascertainment—for any reason—does not interrupt critical transition assistance for viable candidates, including post-election agency briefings.



The entire appointments process needs reform. Personnel vetting and disclosure requirements are increasingly complex, and delays in the Senate confirmation process grow with each transition.

Although the Biden transition had a large and well-organized personnel team, which allowed for more than 1,000 nonconfirmed political appointees with a high degree of previous governing experience to be sworn in on Day One of the new administration, only about one-third of key national security positions requiring Senate confirmation were filled within seven months of Biden taking office. We describe in further detail options to streamline vetting and security processes and improve the Senate confirmation process.



The events of 2020 and other post-election issues that have occurred during the modern era underscore the need for contingency planning by transition teams to handle a wide range of unconventional challenges.

In 2000, a close election shortened the transition period for George W. Bush; in 2016, key personnel changes to the Trump transition leadership after the election required a restart from scratch; and in 2020, the disputed outcome delayed the funding and access to the agencies after the election. The early decision by the Biden transition to devote time and resources to contingency planning helped the team deal with the unprecedented obstacles that occurred. The threats posed by cybersecurity risks, foreign actors and increased political polarization will only make contingency planning even more important in future years.



To reduce disruptions and better shift from the transition to governing, transition teams should create continuity in both personnel and policy planning.

On personnel, transition teams should transfer the senior staff of their hiring teams to the Office of Presidential Personnel after the inauguration. On policy, transition teams should establish procedures that ensure materials created during the transition are shared with future officeholders.



The work of experienced career officials is the foundation for a successful transition.

Many departments and agencies, including most notably the General Services Administration, benefited from selecting transition directors with extensive transition experience. These directors were crucial in helping the incoming administration be prepared to govern on Day One despite the delay in the ascertainment declaration.



By requiring virtual collaboration on an unprecedented scale, the remote work environment fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic presented real opportunities and significant challenges for the transition and agency teams.

The 2020–21 transition was the first to be conducted almost entirely remotely due to the pandemic. In hindsight, many government officials and transition staff felt remote options made meetings more efficient and allowed a wider range of people to participate in the process. At the same time, employing remote workers in many different locations created increased administrative burdens and collaboration challenges.



In addition to political leaders of all parties, the media, civil society and business leaders can contribute to the health of our country by supporting the peaceful transfer of power.

All voices are important in communicating about, advocating for and defending transition planning and the transfer of power through a nonpartisan lens.

Since 2008, the Partnership for Public Service has served as the nation’s premier nonpartisan source of information and resources designed to help presidential candidates and their teams lay the groundwork for a new administration or for a president’s second term. Our 2010 “Ready to Govern” report on modern transition planning provided a roadmap to formalize and improve the culture, operations and resources of presidential transitions, and we have successfully advocated for a series of amendments to the 1963 transition law that have improved the process.¹

During the past decade, perceptions that it is presumptuous to “measure the White House drapes” have given way to a general—but not universal—understanding that new presidents must plan ahead to provide leadership and continuity in a fast-paced and dangerous world.

Candidates have started transition planning during the first half of the election year as a matter of course. Following an election, presidents-elect now appreciate the importance of nominating their top national security and economic advisors, and the Senate has typically offered better-than-average attention to confirming these most senior positions soon after Inauguration Day while lagging behind on subsequent appointments.

The events of the 2020–21 transition, however, brought attention to longstanding areas of fragility and point to issues that require a stronger legal foundation, the need for increased financial support for a range of transition activities, improved agency planning and a focus on reforming the appointment process.

This report was produced by the Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition® and the Boston Consulting Group. Both organizations played crucial roles in assisting all three of the major stakeholder groups throughout the 2020–21 transition. A detailed summary of the Center’s work is available in the report entitled, “Looking Back: The Center for Presidential Transition’s Pivotal Role in the 2020–21 Trump to Biden Transfer of Power,” produced in April 2021.²

¹ Partnership for Public Service, “Ready to Govern: Improving the Presidential Transition,” Jan. 2010. Available at <https://bit.ly/3AZ9T6Z>

² Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition, “Looking Back: The Center for Presidential Transition’s Pivotal Role in the 2020-21 Trump to Biden Transfer of Power,” April 2021. Available at <https://bit.ly/3jadYzh>



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