



# Joe Biden's First Year in Office: Nominations and Confirmations

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## **About the Authors**

### **About the Partnership**

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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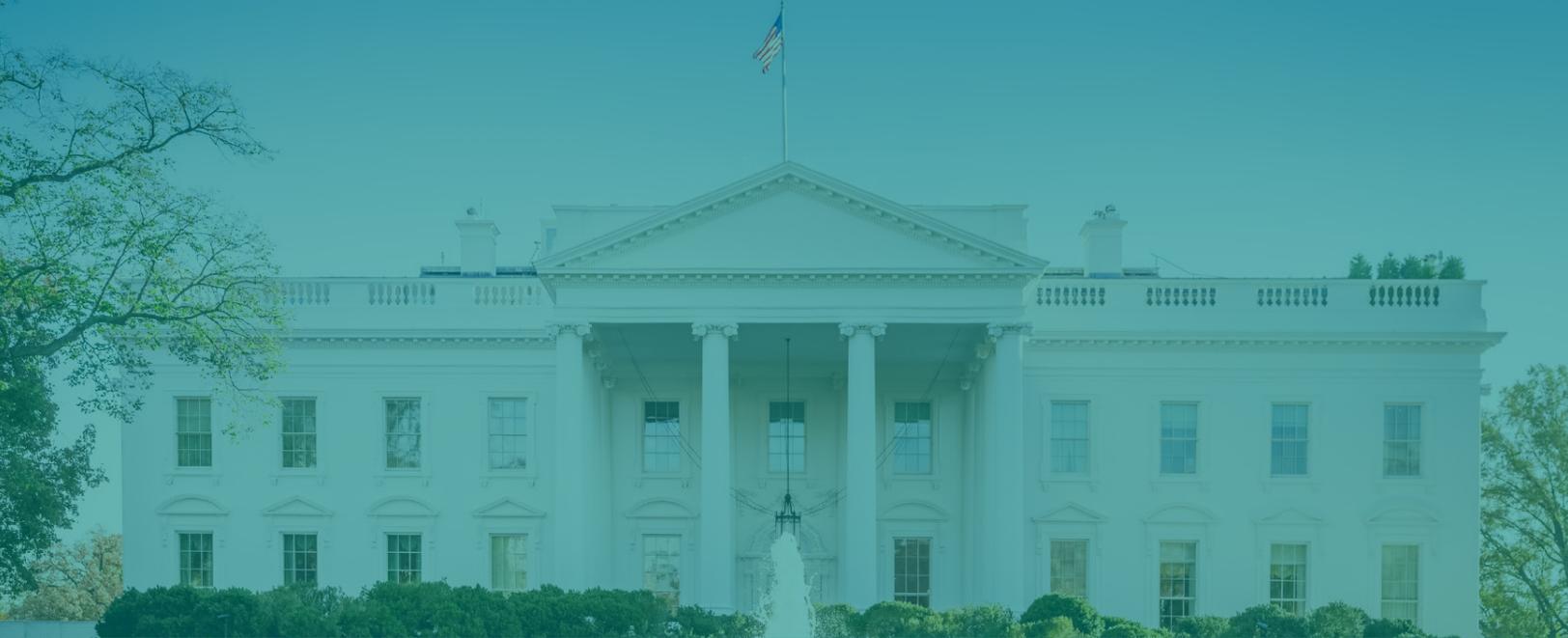


# Introduction

**From advancing their campaign promises to facing emerging threats at home and abroad, presidents' first year in office shapes their presidency. Among their most important tasks is to fill more than 1,200 positions that require Senate confirmation.**

The Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition has been tracking Senate-confirmed presidential appointments since late 2016. This year, we tracked and analyzed how President Joe Biden's first year in office compares with the previous three presidents, examining his nominations and confirmations from Jan. 20, 2021, to Dec. 31, 2021. The following data analysis represents nominations for all civilian positions including ambassadors, judges, marshals and U.S. attorneys.

For an interactive list of key civilian nominees and their statuses, see the [Biden Political Appointee Tracker](#) which is updated each weekday by the Partnership for Public Service and The Washington Post.

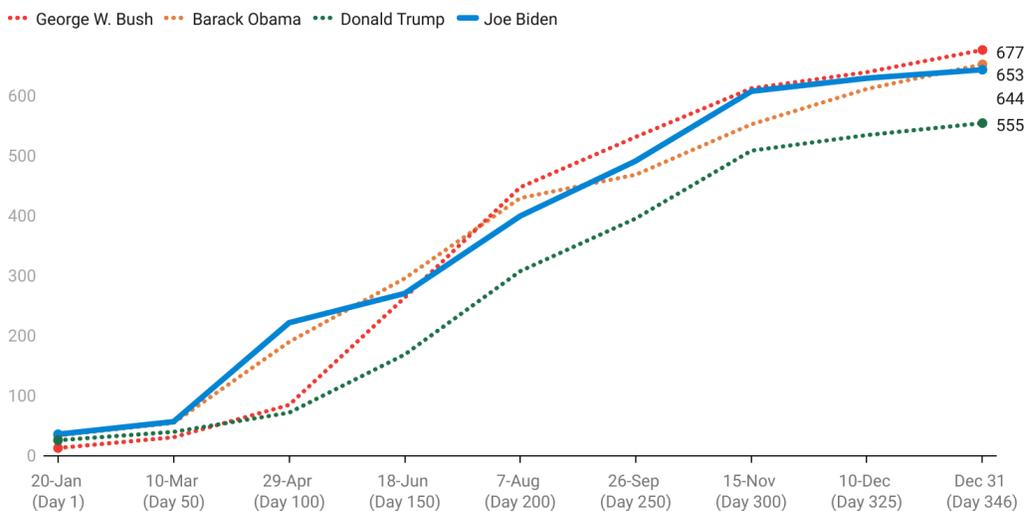


# Nominations

## Biden made slightly fewer than Bush and Obama, but more than Trump.

By the end of the 2021 calendar year, Biden nominated 644 people for presidentially appointed Senate-confirmed positions, more than President Donald Trump had in the same time frame (555) and slightly fewer than President Barack Obama (653) and President George W. Bush (677).

### Pace of Senate nominations in a president's first year



Count includes all civilian nominations submitted to the Senate including judges, marshals and U.S. attorneys. The graph includes the dates nominations were formally submitted to the Senate. Nominations are often announced days or weeks before they are officially submitted. Data as of Dec. 31, 2021.

Chart: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition® • Source: Congress.gov • Created with Datawrapper

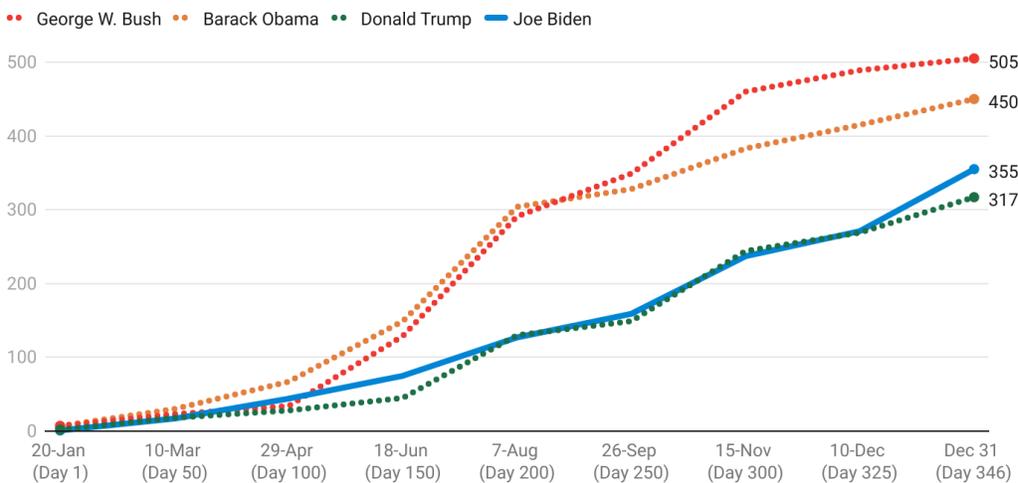


# Confirmations

## Biden has fewer than Bush and Obama, but slightly more than Trump.

Despite nominating roughly the same number of appointees as Bush and Obama, far fewer of Biden's nominees were confirmed in the same time frame. Congress has confirmed 355 of Biden's nominees. At a comparable time, Congress had confirmed 505 of Bush's and 450 of Obama's. Trump, by contrast, had slightly fewer with 317.

### Pace of Senate confirmations in a president's first year



Count includes all civilian nominations submitted to the Senate including judges, marshals and U.S. attorneys. The graph includes the dates the Senate officially confirmed each nomination. Data as of Dec. 31, 2021.

Chart: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition® • Source: Congress.gov • Created with Datawrapper

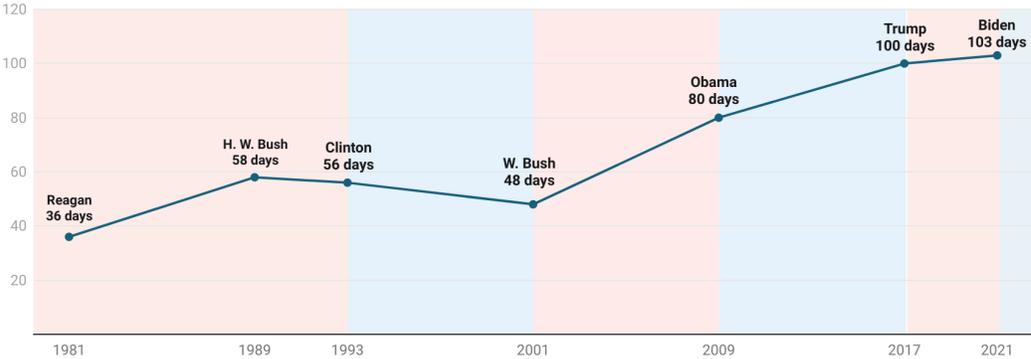


# Average Confirmation Time

## The time it takes for Congress to confirm nominees in a president’s first year continues to grow.

During the president’s first year, it took an average of 103 days for nominees submitted by the Biden administration for Senate-confirmed positions to get confirmed. This is longer than the average for nominees submitted in the first years of the previous six administrations and nearly three times as long as those submitted during President Ronald Reagan’s first year.

**Average length in days to confirm a Senate-confirmed political appointee across administrations - Year 1**



This data was compiled by the Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition® and was gathered from Congress.gov. It includes civilian nominations with exceptions for part-time positions, judges, U.S. marshals, attorneys and positions in the legislative branch. The confirmation process is defined as the time between a president sending a formal nomination to the Senate and the confirmation vote. Data compiled as of Dec. 31, 2021

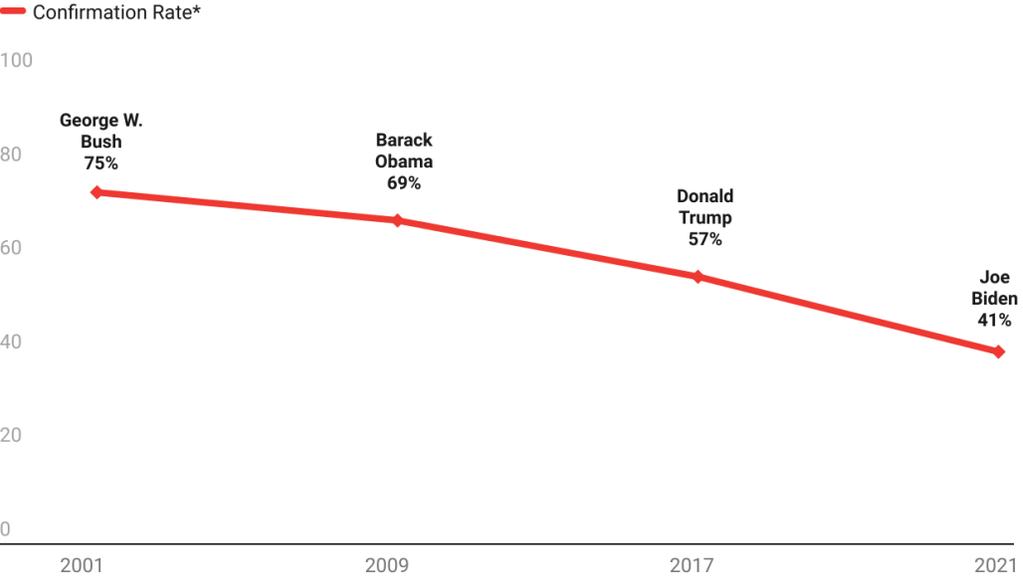
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# Nominations Success Rate

## The confirmation rate of first-year nominations continues to decline.

In Biden's first year, the Senate confirmed only 41% of his nominations. While a small number were withdrawn by the president, 118 were "returned" at the end of the Senate's session—meaning the president would either have to nominate that person again in the next session or nominate someone else. And 171 are still awaiting a vote. By contrast, 75% of Bush's first-year nominees were confirmed, compared with 69% for Obama and 57% for Trump.

### Percent of nominations confirmed in a president's first year



\* Confirmation rate refers to the percentage of first year nominations confirmed on an administration's first year. Data as of Dec. 31, 2021.

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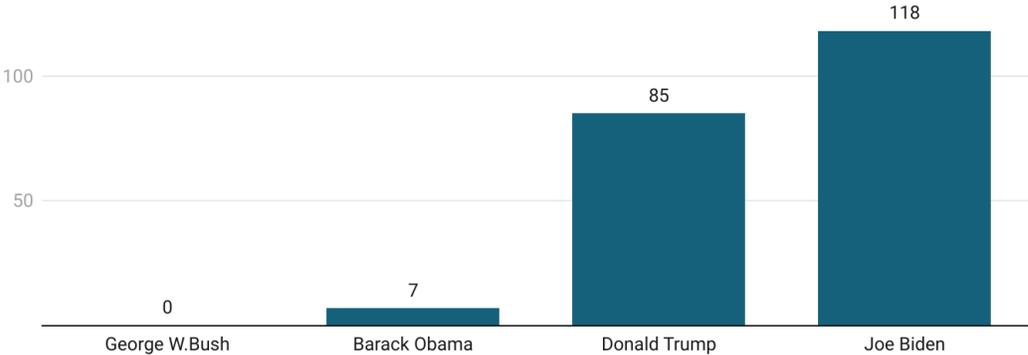


# Returned Nominations

According to a Senate rule, nominations are returned to the president automatically when they have not been confirmed or rejected at the time the Senate adjourns at the end of a congressional session (which roughly correlates to the calendar year) or when the Senate adjourns for a period of more than 30 days. Nominations can be held over, though, if the Senate by unanimous consent agrees to suspend the rule. Nominations that are returned to the president are no longer pending before the Senate and therefore are not eligible for consideration. When the Senate convenes in a new session, the president can resubmit the nomination of the same individual to a position or can choose to put forward a different nominee for the position.

- On Jan. 3, 2022, the Senate returned 118 nominations to the White House.
- Of those, 29 nominees had been waiting between 200 and 300 days to receive a vote, 40 had been waiting between 100 and 200 days, and 49 had been waiting less than 100 days.
- Among the nominations that were returned:
  - Ed Gonzalez, who was nominated for director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. ICE has not had a Senate-confirmed leader for the past five years.
  - Laurel Blatchford who was nominated to be controller at the Office of Management and Budget. The position has not had a confirmed appointee in nearly five years.
  - Victoria Wassmer, nominated to be chief financial officer at the Department of Transportation, waited for 255 days, only to have her nomination returned. The nominations of Robert Hampshire to be DOT assistant secretary for research and technology, and Mohsin Syed to be DOT assistant secretary of government affairs, spent an equal amount of time with the same result.

# Returned nominations at the end of a president's first year



*This count includes all returned civilian nominations submitted to the Senate including judges, marshals and U.S. attorneys. Nominations were returned at the end of the each congressional session which occurred January of the following year. Data as of Jan. 3, 2022.*

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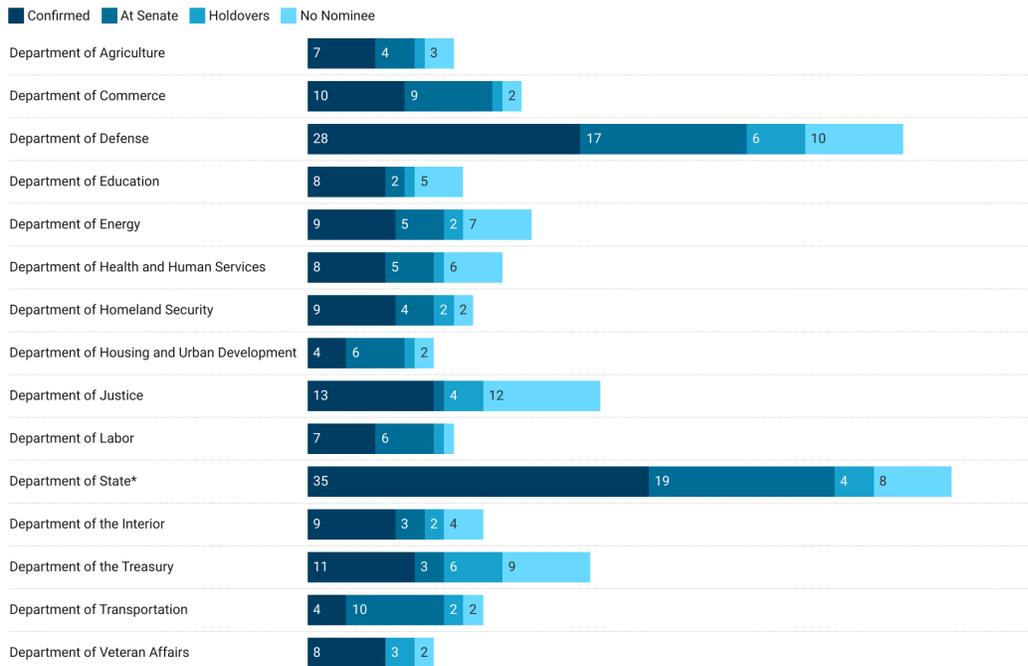


# Agency Snapshot

## Overall trends across agencies as of Dec. 31, 2021.

- An analysis of key positions in the Biden administration by the Biden Political Appointee tracker shows that across the 15 Cabinet departments, the Biden administration had 167 nominees confirmed (this does not include ambassadors), while 94 nominees remained in the Senate awaiting a vote. 37 officials serving in those positions had held the position in the previous administration and continued to serve.
- Across the Cabinet departments, the agencies with the highest percentage of Senate-confirmed officials in place were the Department of Veterans Affairs (85%) and the Department of Homeland Security (65%).
- In contrast, the departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development had the lowest percentage of Senate-confirmed appointees in place. Only 33% of DOT's 18 key positions were held by a Senate-confirmed official (with 10 nominees remaining unconfirmed at the Senate). At HUD, 38% of the department's 13 key positions were filled with a Senate-confirmed appointee (and six nominees remaining unconfirmed in the Senate).

## Position Snapshot During Biden's First Year



\*Excluding ambassadors

Our snapshot data accounts for approximately 800 top executive-branch positions across agencies, a portion of the roughly 1,200 positions that require Senate confirmation. The count reflects positions as of Dec. 31, 2021, and it does not account for returned nominations on Jan 3, 2022. Data compiled by the Center for Presidential Transition from Congress.gov and The Washington Post and Partnership for Public Service Biden Political Appointee Tracker. The tracker includes all full-time, civilian positions in the executive branch that require Senate confirmation except for judges, marshals and U.S. attorneys.



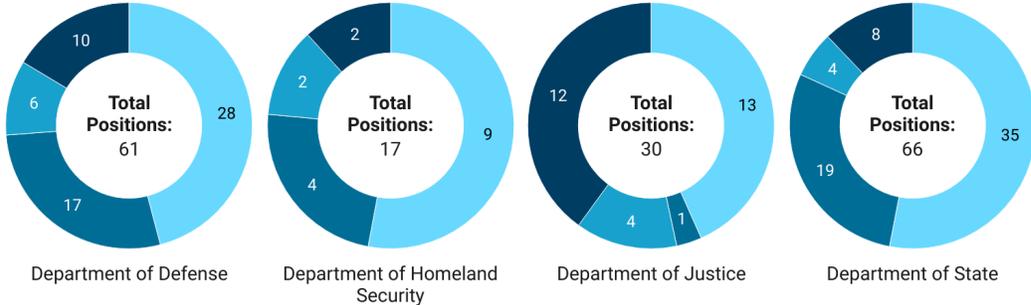
# Confirmations Across Security Agencies

As we wrote in a blog post marking the 20th anniversary of the attacks, a transition to a new presidential administration is a unique moment of vulnerability for our country. In 2004, the bipartisan 9/11 Commission suggested delays in confirmations could undermine the country’s safety since a lack of appointments could significantly disrupt national security policymaking.

- As of Dec. 31, 2021, 97 of 175 key Senate-confirmed positions (55%) were filled. The Biden administration nominated 126 of the 175 key Senate-confirmed positions in four national security agencies--the departments of Defense, Justice, Homeland Security and State (excluding ambassadors). The Senate confirmed 85 (67%) of the 126 nominations.
- Of the 175 key positions, 73 did not have a Senate-confirmed appointee in place (42%). Of those, 41 nominees were awaiting Senate action. The White House had not submitted nominees for the remaining 32 positions.

## National Security Agencies Snapshot

Confirmed At Senate Holdovers No Nominee



The data accounts for approximately 800 top executive-branch positions, a portion of the roughly 1,200 positions that require Senate confirmation. The count reflects positions as of Dec. 31, 2021, and does not account for returned nominations on Jan. 3, 2022. Data compiled by the Center for Presidential Transition from Congress.gov and The Washington Post and Partnership for Public Service Biden Political Appointee Tracker. The tracker includes all full-time, civilian positions in the executive branch that require Senate confirmation except for judges, marshals and U.S. attorneys.

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# Ambassadorial Confirmations and Nominations

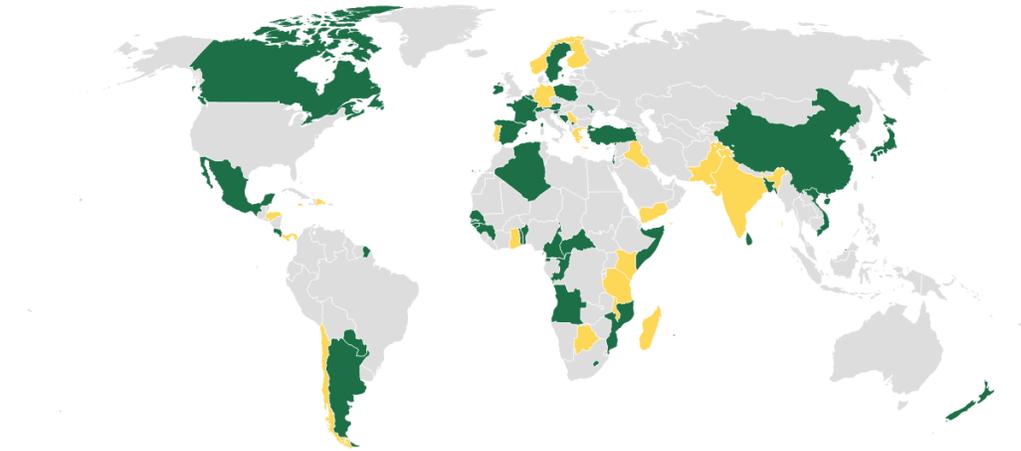
For all presidents, ambassadors play key roles in representing the United States abroad.

- From the more than 160 key Senate-confirmed ambassadorships to countries and multilateral organizations, Biden made 88 nominations, outpacing Trump's 63 nominations but falling behind Obama's 107 nominations and Bush's 115.
- In 2021, the Senate confirmed only 55 ambassadors nominated by Biden (63%), the lowest confirmation rate in the past 20 years. Meanwhile, 90% of Bush's first-year ambassadorial nominations were confirmed during the same period, and 85% of Obama's and 75% of Trump's nominations were confirmed.

# Ambassador nominations and confirmations

## Ambassador Status

Confirmed Submitted



The map reflects submitted and confirmed nominations of ambassadors to countries. Countries in gray may have holdover Ambassadors or interim leadership in place. Data compiled by the Center for Presidential Transition from Congress.gov and The Washington Post and Partnership for Public Service Biden Political Appointee Tracker. The count reflects positions as of Dec. 31, 2021, and it does not account for returned nominations on Jan. 3, 2022. Map: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition® • Source: Congress.gov • Created with Datawrapper

## Pace of nominations and confirmations of ambassadors in a president's first year

		Jan. 20 Day 1	April 29 Day 100	August 7 Day 200	Nov 15 Day 300	Dec 31 Day 330	Confirmation Rate (Percent)
W.Bush	Submitted	0	4	74	112	115	
	Confirmed	0	1	55	103	103	90
Obama	Submitted	1	9	71	95	107	
	Confirmed	0	4	63	67	91	85
Trump	Submitted	3	7	39	61	63	
	Confirmed	0	2	21	43	47	75
Biden	Submitted	1	12	49	81	88	
	Confirmed	0	1	1	9	55	63

This count includes ambassadors to countries and multilateral organizations, ambassadors at large, representatives and positions with the rank of ambassador. The submitted category captures the number of nominations formally submitted to the Senate. The number of confirmed nominations captures non-concurrent positions. For example, we count nominations to be the ambassador to the General Assembly of the UN and a separate nomination to be the representative of the United States in the UN Security Council as a single nomination. Data as of Dec. 31, 2021.

Table: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition® • Source: Congress.gov • Created with Datawrapper

# Conclusion

Our government works best when it has a full team of capable and committed individuals serving in career positions and political appointments. For the past decades, the number of Senate-confirmed positions grew from 779 to 1,237, a 59% increase between 1960 and 2016. This increase—along with challenges in the confirmation process—have resulted in the confirmation times for nominees taking longer every year, and vacancies across agencies increasing significantly. These trends highlight serious barriers to our government’s effectiveness, responsiveness and agility. Our analysis of Biden’s progress with nominations and confirmations in his first year indicates that the current number of positions needing Senate confirmation continues to lead to a confirmation logjam that grows each year. The holdup has limited the ability of administrations to fill critical roles and undermines the effectiveness of the American government.

Since 2001, the Partnership for Public Service has contributed to making government more effective and efficient. In 2011, the Partnership supported the Presidential Appointment Efficiency and Streamlining Act, which reduced the overall number of Senate-confirmed positions by 163. Last year, the Partnership’s Center for Presidential Transition, the premier nonpartisan source of information and resources for presidential candidates and their teams, published *Unconfirmed*. In that report, we present seven approaches for rethinking Senate-confirmed positions, favoring longer-term alternatives while preserving the Senate’s oversight and constitutional role. From converting Senate-confirmed positions to noncareer Senior Executive Service positions or political appointments that do not need Senate confirmation, to eliminating redundant and consistently vacant appointments, the approaches are meant to start a conversation—one that is aimed at resetting the appointments process while maintaining its core principles and intent. Only through cooperation from the executive and legislative branches can the appointments process be reformed from the unsustainable status quo.

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