

# Presidential Capacity

Kenneth Lowande\*      Nicholas Birdsong<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

Some lament the lack of “capacity” in the contemporary 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 must 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 White House. 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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\*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Michigan: lowande@umich.edu

<sup>†</sup>Ph.D. Student, Department of Political Science, University of Michigan: nbrdsong@umich.edu

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Many lament the lack of “capacity” in the contemporary U.S. Congress (LaPira, Drutman and Kosar, 2020). 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 paper, 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 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 made Congress better off 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 (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. So, today, 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 employment records with tens of 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, turnover rates in the White House are significantly higher than those in Congress, even if you exclude 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. Second, 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.

At the same time, however, 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 developments in the U.S. 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 the White House is the prestige employer in politics, led by an individual focused on attracting and retaining a team that would help them change policy. Presidents do not hire solely for policy expertise and preference homophily, then keep that team around for the driven goal of changing policy. They appear to value people with skills in credit-claiming, and have trouble keeping even those people. The White House looks a lot like the “incapacitated” Congress.

But we see an underlying strategic logic to what looks like incapacity. The findings have important implications for how we understand “capacity” in the American presidency, and in political institutions in general. Many loathe developments in contemporary Congresses: the focus on messaging, copartisan teamsmanship (Lee, 2016), and 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. The President is not special. While they care about getting things done in a real, substantive way, they are also a politician attuned to the importance of symbolic politics. They invest real, tangible government resources to make sure they are seen doing their job—even when it may be to the detriment of effective government.

## **Political Institutions and Capacity**

Political institutions are just ideas on paper unless they have the real, 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). 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 from other institutions. According to scholars of the legislative and executive branches, this is precisely what is happening to Congress, and by some accounts, in even executive branch agencies.

In Congress, there are numerous empirical markers of a decline in capacity. Topline funding figures for human capital in Congress have stagnated or declined for decades (Reynolds, 2020; Bolton and Thrower, 2022), with resource allocation shifted toward public relations and constituency service (Crosson et al., 2021; Lee, 2016; Jensen, 2011). The staff that Congress does spend money on spends 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, either (J.Fagan and McGee, 2022). The decline of incumbency advantage and shortening of member terms might disincentivize staff from making Congress their career (Fong, Lowande and Rauh, 2024).

By most accounts, this declining capacity has led to worse outcomes. Congress is passing fewer laws (Warburton, 2024), 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 might be best 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 sometimes 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). Surveys of administrators themselves demonstrate that many agencies are perceived as having workforces that are "not at all skilled" at their core jobs (Richardson, Clinton and Lewis, 2018). By some measures, 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 seem to regard both the legislative branch and the vast majority of the executive branch as suffering from a capacity problem. At the federal level, the public sector seems to have a shortage of people with the skills and expertise that would allow these political institutions to function well, with one apparent exception—the White House.

While scholars say other political institutions have declining capacity, they say the opposite is true of the White House. The expansion of the “presidential branch” is an essential stylized fact about American government since the New Deal. It kicks off, by most accounts, with one of the more famous lines written by political scientists: “The president needs help.” At the 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 because, 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). There is no question presidential capacity has gone up. So, 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 goes back a long way, and is the foundation of the field of public administration. What do presidents need? They need competent experts who know how to make the trains run on time. They need a place for them to do their work, 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. In the congressional sphere, this is what people like Volden and Wiseman (2014) mean

when they use the word “effectiveness.” 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 famously 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 some shared vision.

If you ask the typical political scientist today, they would tell you that presidents want both. 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). Nonetheless, what happens within the White House is at least as interesting and important. 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. In light of that fact, 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, shortly after taking office, 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 made a show of it by inviting a hundred college presidents to the White House. They held a photo-op in the Oval Office, invited reporters, and held press conferences. They then spent taxpayer dollars—hired personnel, and gave that personnel physical space in the EOP. It is hard to square this choice with the goal of political control, and this is not the only case. Scholars critiqued the Clinton administration for filling the White House with young, inexperienced campaign aides (Patterson, 1996). 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. 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 at least 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 usually implied that investment in a communications operation might make the president more effective as a persuader—that better speeches or messaging will get presidents the policies they want. This, despite the evidence that presidential rhetoric cannot move public opinion (Edwards, 2003).

In short, there is little theorizing about these kinds of presidential choices. The examples above are generally treated as sideshows to the main goals that presidential capacity serves. The Trump White House was, supposedly, uniquely vapid and incompetent. The Clinton administration made early mistakes, which it later recovered from. Every political institution has organizational fluff, known as a public relations office. The choices are superfluous, costless, or unimportant. 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 is, in short, 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 scarce resources exercising it. This argument is supported with evidence from presidential staffs 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 categorically different goal served by—and meaning of—presidential capacity.

## **Building Presidential Capacity**

We start from the same place others do. 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 their favorability ratings and the public’s assessment of their handling of the office—in their pursuit of re-election, and in the election of co-partisans. Popularity can also come later, in the eyes of history, what scholars sometimes call a historical legacy. Presidents want to be able to imagine some future in which they are revered as great heroes. Much of their behavior can be linked to these general goals, but the behavior in question is organizing the presidential branch.

Organizing differs from other presidential strategies. It is one-step removed. When presidents issue an executive order, or sign some dramatic piece of new legislation, they are directly serving the goal of being popular and getting what they want done. Organizing, on the other hand, is about capacity. 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? Presidents reveal their

answers to these questions by hiring, approving lines of reporting, creating offices, delegating tasks, and ultimately, building their teams. Moreover, no organization is all things 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. Put differently, we think 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 Lowande (2024) argues, is that “they know they will be judged by how their actions appear”(34). There is a fundamental gap between the perception of accomplishment and actual accomplishment. This is not just a matter of retrospective assessments of presidents long dead. Every president complains when 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 would be helped by an immigration order because he would “look like he’s seizing control of the situation.”<sup>1</sup> Biden signed such an order weeks later. Presidents know that perceptions matter, and cultivating them is real work.

One way of thinking about this gap is to admit that, for a president’s purposes, policy has separate and distinct dimensions: substantive and symbolic. Substantive means the degree to which a policy alters the “doings of government” (a la Howell, 2013). For the president, altering the doings of government is a long-term process well-studied by political scientists. We know it is subject to both random chance and the actions of constitutional (e.g., Moe and Howell, 1999; Bolton, Figueiredo and Lewis, 2021) and de facto (e.g., Lowande, 2018; 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. It is more immediate, relative to substantive accomplishments. The day President Trump tweeted he was banning

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

transgender service members from the military, before a single enlisted person was forcibly separated, denied medical coverage, or rejected from enlistment, we knew Trump's position, then and there.<sup>2</sup>

For people trying to judge the president, that kind of information is valuable, because they will likely never see any material evidence of the consequences of the president's actions. This is not because people are duped or uniquely uncritical observers. 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 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 real policy 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 implication is consistent with models of political agency in which an incumbent takes welfare-reducing action in order to remain popular (e.g., Canes-Wrone and de Marchi, 2002; Judd, 2017). The question, then, is why presidents invest in the capacity to produce symbolic wins.

One reason is that symbolic politics is not costless or easy. Just as the 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. That expertise is indexed by different disciplinary backgrounds and work experiences. Recall Trump's HBCU initiative. What kinds of individuals would be most suited to substantive policymaking, relative to symbolic? Probably people with experience working in education policy, and in particular, the kind who understand the grant and loan programs operated by the Department of Education, which many small HBCUs depend on for their financial survival. A complementary strategy would

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<sup>2</sup>In this case, none of those substantive things ended up happening (Lowande, 2024, 55-60).

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. He would need to employ people who understood political optics and messaging. These are not necessarily experienced bureaucrats and lawyers. In the case of Trump's HBCU initiative, it turns out, he did not rely on bureaucrats, lawyers, or even business leaders with management experience. The primary drivers of the HBCU initiative were first Omarosa Manigault-Newman, a reality television star, and then Jonathan Holifield, a former NFL-player and motivational speaker. Neither had worked in government, but both understood how to make sure the Trump received credit for his action. Manigault-Newman threw the largest ever White House event for HBCU presidents, while Holifield spent two years of the Trump administration traveling the country, giving presentations about what the president was doing for HBCUs. Both served for a short time, then moved on.

Cases like these are illustrative of the underlying capacity choices presidents make when they organize for substance over symbolism. To help them control the executive branch, they need individuals with what Krause and O'Connell (2015) call "managerial competence"—folks who have experience in public service, who have served in management roles, who have degrees in public administration and law. Moreover, ideally, these personnel would also be loyal, in that they would have signposts on their resumes that indicate they share the president's goals. They might have worked for the president's campaign, donated to the president's party, or served in government with a co-partisan. Moreover, once selected, the president would like them to stick around. Turnover undermines the capacity for policy control of the rest of the executive branch. The implementation of policy is as important as its selection and formulation. The president needs aides familiar with past decisions, who know where to follow-up, and how to right the ship when things do not go as planned. This is what makes a "politicized" presidential branch effective.

These conventional hiring imperatives are important, but, we argue, not exhaustive of the

kind of presidential capacity necessary to cultivate political success. Competent administrators and policy experts can be shockingly inept at politics. To make the president's policies effective at communicating the president's position, and cultivating a sense that the president has accomplished a goal, presidents should hire people whose training and experience aid in political credit-claiming and advertising. The White House should tend to hire staff with media, public relations, and communications experience. They might have degrees in these fields, or experience working in the public or private sector that showcases an ability to highlight the successes of an executive. These skills do not necessarily preclude managerial competence, just as managerial competence does not preclude political loyalty. The point is, empirically speaking, very few individuals wear that many hats. There is a loyalty-competence trade-off because people make career choices that are mutually exclusive and trend toward one or the other. The same should be true of public relations and communications. The people best at developing or implementing policy are typically not good at selling it.

Moreover, we argue, there is no particular reason for the president, or the individuals, to remain in government for long periods of time to do so. That is, whereas high turnover among individuals tasked with implementing policy would be a negative indicator of substantive capacity, high turnover among those fighting for the development of policy, and of communications and public relations staff would not indicate a reduced capacity to credit-claim. Making substantive progress in developing and implementing policy takes more time than selling it, and typically involves human capital which is general. Crisis communication consultants can exist because their skills are general—applicable in the short term to any executive or organization dealing with a public crisis of confidence. The same can be said of the more pro-active, positive communications work. It applies general principles without the need for institutional memory, or much follow-through. This mirrors stylized facts from the private sector, where marketing and communications positions typically have higher turnover than those with specialized, firm-specific expertise.

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, in addition to actually accomplishing things. 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. If we are right, there should be evidence in the choices presidents have made in staffing the White House.

## Evidence

To investigate these arguments about presidential capacity, we use datasets constructed from congressional and presidential personnel records. The congressional records used for this study 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. Although 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.

Our novel dataset lists White House staff annually from 1995 to 2024. This list was created from annual reports mandated by Congress (P.L. 103-270), which include the names, salaries, and titles for all employees and detailees of the White House Office. The law, passed in 1994 as part of a broader government accountability measure, opens a unique window into who presidents hire. Going back to at least 1952, the *U.S. Government Manual* included an accounting of White House offices and staff, but these disclosures include only a partial list

of personnel and no salary information.

Most of the annual reports were posted online by the White House, with exceptions. Reports from the Clinton administration were only transmitted to Congress. These records were obtained from the William J. Clinton Presidential Library. Additionally, the report from 2002 was never publicly released.<sup>3</sup> 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 reports have all the errors common to administrative records of this kind. Similar to congressional disbursement records, there are no unique identifiers to link persons across reports. Names may be misspelled, written inconsistently, or changed after marriage. Most errors have been caught and corrected, but some likely remain. Additionally, some individuals who work around the White House may be missing, such as outside contractors and political consultants. For example, Dick Morris does not appear in the staff list during the Clinton administration, despite spending substantial time working for President Clinton. Although some officials are listed as detailees, the White House annual disclosure may not include them all. Detailees may work for the president for a short period before returning to their agencies without ever appearing on a July disclosure. The extent of these issues is unknowable from the records at hand.

In total, we identified 5,701 unique persons in the White House employment reports across 30 years, or about 12,310 staffer-years. Typically, 400-500 people work directly for the White House in any given year. Some presidents hire more on average, while others hire fewer. President Biden has about 518 people on average listed in his reports, whereas the Trump administration listed about 395 employees for each of its reports. The three Democrats in the

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<sup>3</sup>One 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.

series tended to employ more people, in general, than the two Republican presidents. The fact that one president might employ 31% more people than another illustrates how much say they have.

To gain insight into presidential staffing priorities and the kinds of capacity presidents have attempted to build, we used a diverse set of supplementary sources to manually code characteristics possessed by personnel at the time they joined the White House, including race and ethnicity, age, education, and employment experience. The coding process involved distributing randomized subsets of the personnel records among the authors and a team of research assistants. Collectively, we spent around 1,200 hours between May and August 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 recorded interviews.<sup>4</sup> The manual coding process also captured mentions of name changes to facilitate linking individuals across different reports.

Coding reliability inherently varies with the availability of supplementary sources. We might reasonably expect staff employed during the early days of the Internet would have less of an online presence, compared to Millennials working in the White House today. Consistent with these expectations, we had a higher rate of success in locating information for staff who were employed more recently and paid more, as well as those who were Democratic and not female. In total, we were able to identify the prior employment history for XX% of the unique individuals contained in the annual reports.

Linking individuals between personnel records provides a challenge for any study exploring staff transfers. In this case, studying the movement of staff between Congress and the White House requires identifying staffers referenced in both, without a unique identifier. For most staff, matching fields include first name, last name, and middle initial. Matches can also

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<sup>4</sup>A table indicating the frequency of each source can be found in Appendix A of the SI.



be excluded by inference. For example, staff typically do not cross party lines. A staffer making \$80,000 per year in 1996 is unlikely to reappear as a part-time intern in 2016. An employee cannot work for both Congress and the White House simultaneously.<sup>5</sup>

We identified 736 unique people who worked in both Congress and the White House, or about 13% of the full White House roster.<sup>6</sup> This is very likely an underestimate because the two personnel records do not have matching or leading time-series. For the 2010-2023 White House period, about 20% of the White House staffers were once in Congress. For 2015-2020, the figure is 24%, which is probably close to the true figure since some matches first worked in Congress before moving to the White House.

## Findings

We think presidents hire not just to get things done, but to make sure the public has the *perception* they get things done. If there is some truth to this, there should be evidence in the make-up of the White House staff. Presidents should bring in personnel that will give them the capacity to more effectively credit-claim and advertise, and the degree to which they do

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<sup>5</sup>The 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.

<sup>6</sup>To 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.

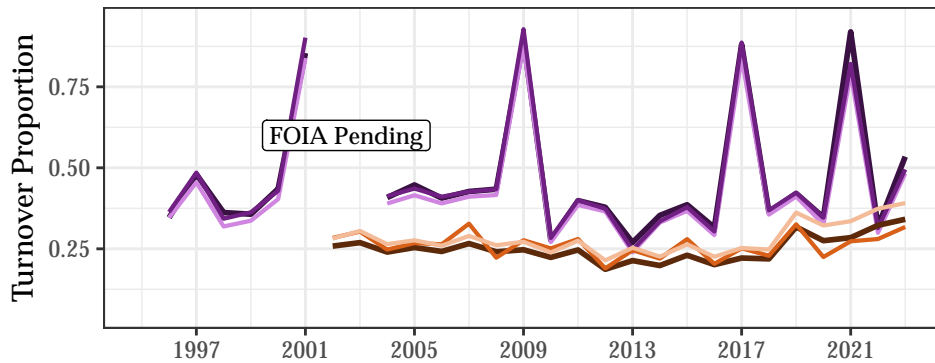
this at the expense of other kinds of skills and expertise should indicate the relative weight they place on each kind of capacity.

Our approach to examining the empirical implications of the argument has three parts. First, we begin with a descriptive baseline for key features of White House staff. Since there is little known about about them systematically, these summary figures can be instructive, though not definitive. So, second, we compare staffing patterns in the White House to those in the U.S. Congress. This provides a useful comparison for all the reasons we stated from the outset: staffing patterns in Congress are generally thought to indicate diminished capacity for substantive governance. Taking stock of where the White House staff sit relative to congressional counterparts, then, can be more illuminating than stating White House patterns alone. Finally, we examine White House recruitment from the population of Congressional staffers. Relative patterns can only tell us so much if we do not understand the pool of workers the White House hires from. Congress, it turns out, is a major pool. Thus, it can help answer what kinds of skills and expertise make someone more likely to be recruited, when the other analyses cannot.

**Turnover.** In general, turnover damages the president's desire to control the bureaucracy. To succeed in changing policy, the president needs a stable team to not only formulate, but to 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.

Our aim is to compare turnover within the White House over time, as well as between Congress and the White House. This is complicated by differences in the underlying personnel records. Each congressional disbursement report typically indicates the dates the staffer worked. This allows one to generate a day-level, running time series of Congress' personnel. The same cannot be done for the White House, which releases one report each July. We therefore collapse the congressional personnel records to comparable, annual snapshots, then ask a simple question: for the snapshot of persons working in Congress or the White House each

July, what proportion of those individuals were still working there, one year later?



**Figure 1 – Even within presidential terms, turnover in the White House is higher, relative to Congress.** Plots turnover in the White House (purple) and congressional offices (orange), with color shades indicating different definitions of turnover. For the White House, we plot the proportion of staffers who were not working there in the previous year (dark), the proportion of staffers who have never worked there (light), and the proportion of non-support staff who have never worked there (medium). For Congress, we plot the proportion of staffers who were not working there in the previous year (dark), the proportion of personal staff who were not working there in the previous year (light), and the proportion of committee staff who were not working there in the previous year (medium). These figures are calculated using comparable July personnel snapshots.

We plot the results in Figure 1. The most obvious fact about White House turnover is that it is punctuated by presidential transitions. During these transitions, the vast majority of White House staff depart. The numbers differ slightly, depending upon how you specify turnover: 88.7% of transition year staff did not work there the previous year, but 83.7% did not work in any previous White House staff. The remaining staff are mostly non-political, like calligraphers or telephone operators.<sup>7</sup> This fact is important, in and of itself. As Liddell (2024) writes, no other critical organization in the world has nearly 100% turnover every 4-8 years. More astounding, however, is that intra-administration turnover is still very high, somewhere between 36.4%–38.5%, again, depending on whether to account for the fact that some hires have experience in a previous administration. These numbers are actually biased downward by non-political staff, as turnover among political staff is 40.5% annually.

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<sup>7</sup>If you exclude these non-political positions, turnover is 95%.

These figures seem less than ideal, if your goal is nothing less than controlling 200 different organizations from a white mansion in Washington, DC. Relatively speaking, these turnover figures put the White House on par with the construction and manufacturing industries.<sup>8</sup> They also make the White House an outlier among the rest of the executive branch, which has annual turnover below 10%. But, as Figure 1 also shows, White House turnover consistently exceeds congressional turnover, which averages 25% for all staff, 28.1% for personal staff, and 26.2% for committee staff from 2002-2023. There are just two years in the series in which White House staff turnover is lower than Congress by any measure. Turnover in the White House is high, both in absolute terms, and relative to a political institution whose high turnover is seen as undermining its capacity to govern.

**Skills and Expertise.** We next examine one way of understanding the kind of capacity presidents are building in their most immediate staff. We rely on the resume information available at staffs' time of hire. Of course, White House staff may acquire skills and even on-the-job training after their recruitment. But, to understand what skills the president and his closest aides prioritize, we have to examine what they looked like on paper when they were hired. Initially, we are interested in the kind of people who might help the president with symbolic politics.

Figure 2 plots trends in staffers with communications-related profiles for both Congress and the White House. The first thing to note is that, within the White House, the share of personnel with communications-related job-titles (medium purple) is flat—and may even be on the decline. These are individuals whose jobs involve communications, media, photography, correspondence, advance travel, speech-writing, political affairs, and public liaising. Notably, this is significantly higher than most congressional offices. The only comparable communications-related staff proportion comes from recent developments in the offices of Congress' party leaders, which aligns with what Lee (2016) has found. Of course, titles can

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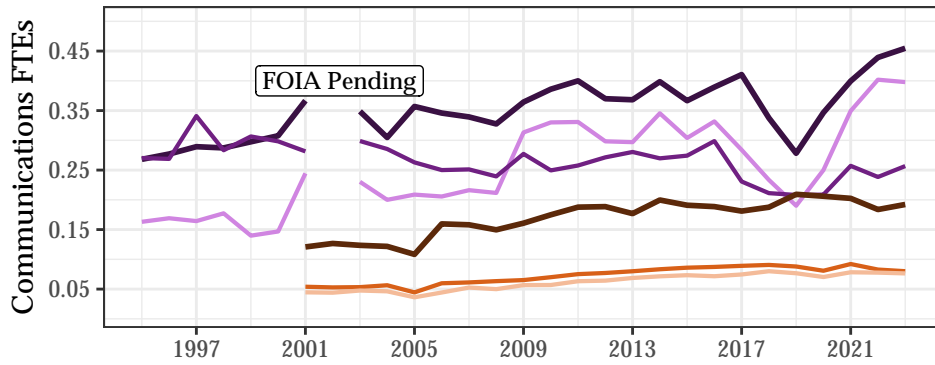
<sup>8</sup>See: "Job Openings and Labor Turnover - January 2023," Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDL-23-0434, March 8, 2023.

be deceptive. Many White House staffers have generic titles like “special assistant” that do not describe what they 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.

Thus, we next examine education and work experience prior to hiring. The light purple line in Figure 2 denotes the proportion of White House staff who had a previous job title in communications and public relations. This includes jobs in speech-writing, media relations, public relations strategy and consulting, publishing, advance scheduling and travel, blogging, campaigning, and political advocacy. We also plot an additional means of specifying communications experience, in dark purple, which includes job titles, along with communications-related employers and college degrees.<sup>9</sup> A notable contrast emerges. Not only do more White House staff have more public relations experience than those with official PR-related job titles, the fraction of staffers who have this experience is on the rise, which parallels a similar rise in Congress.

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<sup>9</sup>The communications-related degree fields were: journalism, writing, communication, English, literature, marketing, film, media, graphic design, advertising, language, digital, hospitality, public relations, speech, reporting, rhetoric, video, human services, theater, theatre, radio, aesthetics, event planning, campaigning, advocacy, broadcast, and drama. We think this under-counts communications-related training in degree plans, as the most frequent college major for White House staff is political science, and some students receive instruction in political communication and messaging.



**Figure 2 – Communications staff have risen in both the White House and Congress.** Plots the allocation of personnel to communications in the White House (purple) and congressional offices (orange), with color shades indicating different definitions of communications. For the White House, we plot the proportion of staffers who were hired with communications work experience (light), the proportion of staffers with communications-related titles (medium), and the proportion of staff with communication-related job past experience, employers, or education (dark). For Congress, we plot the proportion of staffers with communications-related titles for party leaders (dark), committee staff (light), and rank-and-file members (medium). These figures are calculated using comparable July personnel snapshots.

These figures, again, are notably high in their own right, high relative to Congress, and may be increasing over time. That last point, however, should be treated with some caution. Our data collection procedure relies on what is publicly available. More accurately, the experience measures should be regarded as the proportion of staffers we were able to find. Public information is, in general, harder to come by for lower-level officials and officials who served in earlier administrations. It is possible that some individuals in the Clinton administration had a communications pedigree we were unable to find, simply because less detailed online biographical information exists. It's notable, however, that even these experience-related measures exceed the proportions of congressional staff with communications-related jobs. Overall, the White House is filled with staff whose experience touches skills the president would need to cultivate their public image. In the most recent report, the 45% of the Biden White House staff had such a background.

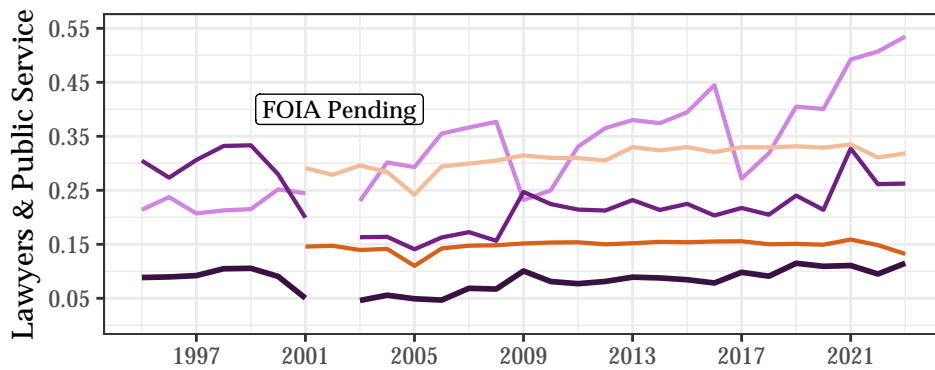
This, naturally, begs for comparisons to other kinds of skills and experience. In building their capacity to operate, our central contention is that presidents balance the need for sym-

bolic politics with substantive control of the executive branch. How prevalent is experience that might be of use to a president interested in political control of the administrative state? We look at a variety of employee attributes that might indicate that skillset, and plot them in Figure 3. The first lines worth examining represent the proportion of staffers in the White House (dark purple), congressional party leaders (light orange), and all congressional offices (dark orange) with titles that indicate they were legal counsel. Notably, over the complete time-series, both trend lines are essentially flat. It is also worth noting that *a larger proportion of staff in Congress* are legal counsel than in the White House. Titles, again, mask the true level of legal experience. Thus, we also plot the proportion of staffers with a law degree or work experience as an attorney.<sup>10</sup> This is typically double the number of official legal counsel in the White House, and appears to be on the rise since the early 2000s.

Finally, we plot the proportion of staffers with prior experience working in the public sector, in any position (light purple). This reveals one of the more striking patterns in our data. Every presidential administration in our data shows the following pattern. The first year of a president's term sees the smallest proportion of staff with prior experience in government, a figure that monotonically increases over time. Remember that these figures do not count White House work experience. The proportion of staff who had public-sector experience *immediately* prior to being recruited increases within term. At the same time, the number of staff with *political or campaign* experience shows precisely the opposite. Year 1 has the highest proportion of staffers with political experience, a figure which gradually declines over time. One interpretation is that early in their terms, presidents tend to pull staff directly from the political operation that brought them to the White House, but, over time, identify and vet personnel more suited to helping them substantively govern.

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<sup>10</sup>For this, we include legal experience in the public and private sector.



**Figure 3 – Lawyers have always been more prevalent in Congress, relative to the White House. Presidents recruit more public servants throughout their term.** Plots the allocation of personnel to legal counsel (dark lines) in the White House (purple) and congressional offices (orange). Light purple indicates the proportion of White House staff with some kind of public-sector experience prior to hiring. Light orange plots the proportion of congressional party leadership staff allocated to policy-making roles. Medium purple indicates the proportion of White House staff with a law degree or legal employment history.

**Selection.** By their nature, trend lines offer many possible interpretations. One purpose of bringing these stylized facts to light is that they were unknown. But, more importantly, they clash with some conventional understandings of presidential capacity. On paper, their communications staffs are small and perhaps stagnant in terms of their overall staff allocation. But this masks the fact that a large proportion of staff bring skills and expertise in just that. This may be on the rise, relative to White House staffs in the 1990s. It is also significantly higher than in Congress. Moreover, the turnover patterns within the White House are at odds with what most would regard as ideal for the purposes of effective public management.

Therefore, we move beyond examining the active make-up of the White House staff, and instead look at staff movement from Congress to the White House. To do this, we generated July cross-sections of all individuals who worked for a member of Congress within a given calendar year, so that the unit of analysis is staffer-year. We removed all non-political staffers who worked for support units of Congress, like the Sergeant-at-Arms.<sup>11</sup> Our dependent vari-

<sup>11</sup>No congressional staffer with experience working only for a support unit has ever been hired by the White House.



able is being hired by the White House in the following year. The critical question is what makes staffers more likely to be recruited by the White House.

In terms of research design, there are two distinct ways to answer this question, each offering slightly different interpretations. In our first analysis, we include staffer and year fixed effects, so all effects should be thought of as within-staffers comparisons. In a second, 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, whether the staffer changed jobs within-year, and office ideological distance from the hiring president as controls. The full results for both analyses are reported in Tables B.1 and B.2.

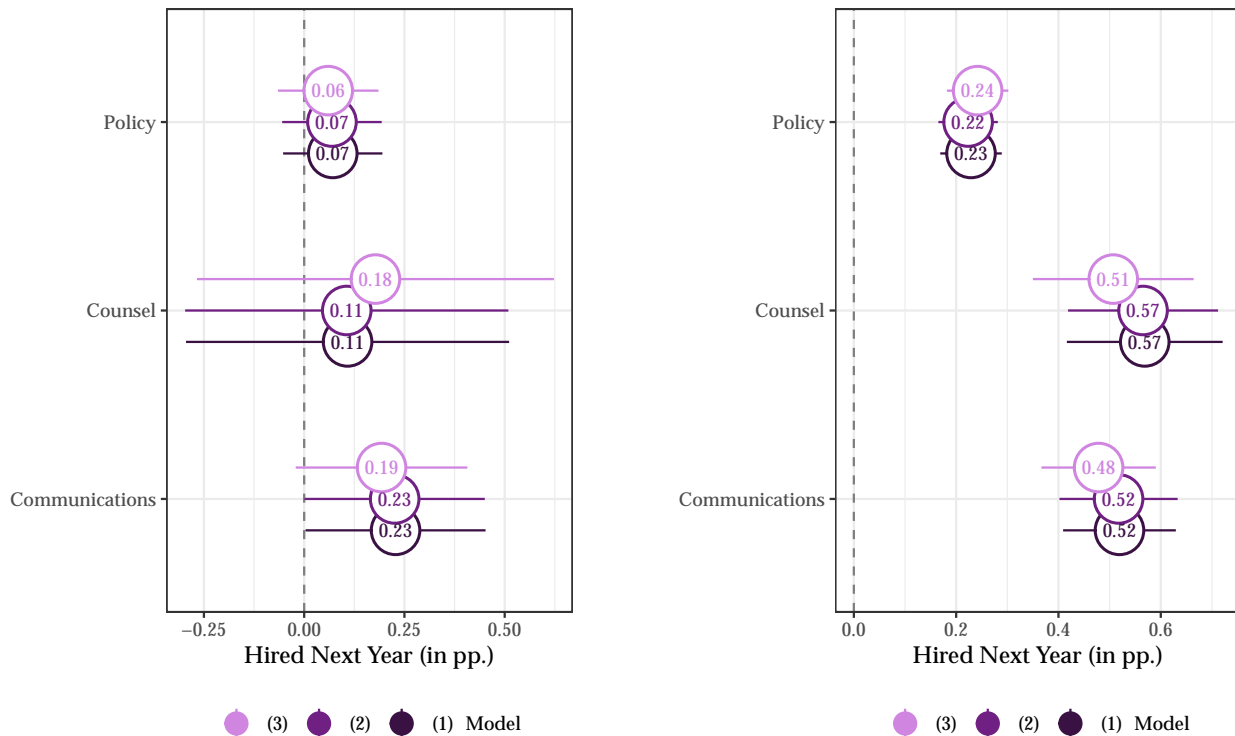
We plot the most critical tests of our argument in Figure 4. Panel (a) shows the within-staffers effect of different kinds of congressional experience on being hired by the White House. The independent variables are the proportion of the previous year's job titles which fell into policy, counsel (i.e., lawyer), or communications categories.<sup>12</sup> Thus, these indicators are not mutually exclusive, as staff might move jobs within year, or have a job that references more than one role.

As Figure 4(a) shows, the only staff experience that seems to enhance the relative odds of White House experience is communications experience. Staff with this experience see a 0.23 percentage point increase in the likelihood of being hired the following year. This is a small absolute increase, given the fact that there are around 40 times as many congressional staffers

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<sup>12</sup>For policy positions, we identified professional staff members, advisers, policy analysts, senior strategists, legislative assistants, legislative aides, legislative correspondents, legislative fellows, chiefs of staff, budget analysts, budget director, chief clerks, economists, and policy directors. For lawyers, 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.

**Figure 4 – Congressional staffers in communications roles are more likely to be hired by the White House.** Plots estimated marginal changes in the probability of begin hired the next year by the White House, both between and within congressional staffers.



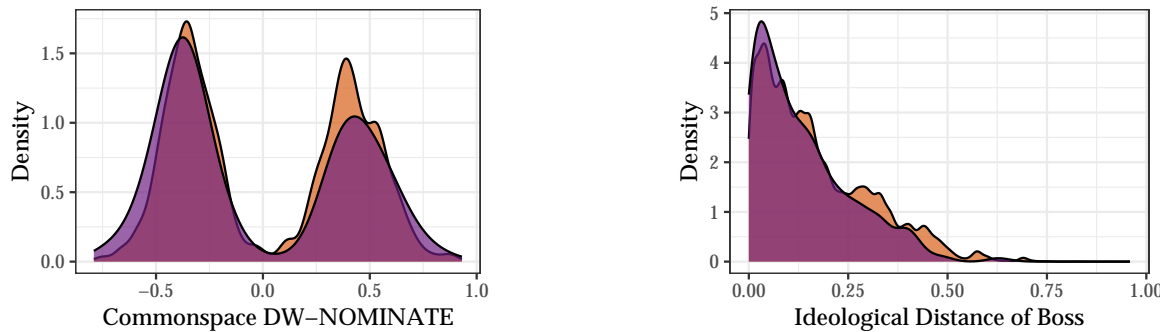
**(a) Within.** Reports linear probability coefficients with standard errors clustered by staffer and fixed effects for year and staffer. Full results reported in Table B.1.

**(b) Between.** Reports simulated effects from logistic regressions with standard errors clustered by staffer and year fixed effects. Full results reported in Table B.2.

as White House jobs. But it is a massive relative increase, at roughly +38% increase in the odds of being hired, relative to those with no recent communications experience.

This does not mean that the White House does not value either policy or legal expertise. To the contrary, the between analysis in Figure 4(b) suggests that all experience in these roles enhances a congressional resume. Staff with zeros in each factor will hold secretarial positions or work primary in constituent services. The difference in the effect of being a lawyer from (a) to (b) is likely due to the fact that few congressional staffers transition into counsel roles while in Congress. Most importantly, however, even in the peer analysis, communications experience is more highly prized, relative to policy experience. In fact, it is effectively equivalent to experience working as a lawyer in Congress.

**Figure 5 – Presidents tend to hire staffers from ideologically proximate offices, which polarizes the distribution of White House staff from administration to administration.** Plots the average commonspace DW-NOMINATE score for the member(s) of Congress in charge of the office(s) the staffer worked for in that year (left panel), along with the absolute distance between copartisan staffers and the president. Purple indicates White House staffers who once worked in Congress, orange is everyone else.



Finally, we examine the ideological makeup of these staffers’ congressional bosses. If presidents want to secure policies they prefer, they must find loyal officials willing to go along. In the left panel of Figure 5, we plot Commonsense DW-NOMINATE scores for congressional staffers’ bosses, among those who were and were not hired by the White House at some point. The purple density is the distribution of those hired, the orange were never hired. As expected, presidents hire staff with members who are proximate to the president. The right panel of Figure 5 plots the ideological distance between co-partisan bosses and the president. As this figure, along with Tables B.1 and B.2 show, a decrease in ideological distance is associated with an increased probability of hiring. This also brings to light an interesting equilibrium implication: Because presidents of the last three decades have not been selected from the moderate wings of their party, the White House staff over the full series tends to be more ideologically polarized than congressional staff over the same period.

Overall, we see in this collection of patterns strong support for our perspective on presidential capacity. There is, of course, evidence that presidents attempt to hire people with the skills, experience, and requisite political loyalty to help them control and implement their preferred policies. At the same time, the make-up of the White House staff is difficult to reconcile with that goal alone. The White House is more transient and public-relations focused

than the U.S. Congress, a political institution consistently regarded as *too* transient and *too* focused on messaging. Communications experience may be proliferating in the White House over time, and the hiring pool in Congress eagerly supplies it.

## Discussion

Our study revises what it means for presidents to politicize the presidency. Presidents maintain broad discretion over hiring decisions in the White House. If they were only interested in maximizing their capacity for bureaucratic control and achieving desired policy objectives, they would invest in staff with experience in public service and management. However, rather than possessing a relative abundance of substantive policy expertise, we find that these staff appear even less equipped than their legislative counterparts along the same dimensions associated with a capacity deficit in Congress. As institutional knowledge facilitates the effective implementation and oversight of new initiatives, we might expect presidents to focus on retention. Instead, we see individuals moving in and out of the White House at a rate of about 40% annually, after excluding nonpartisan, administrative-type roles. But staff transitions present less of a challenge for communications strategies, which do not require the same depth of institutional knowledge.

In short, how presidents have decided to structure their offices suggests that modern presidents prioritize more than the capacity to direct policy alone. Presidents also seek the capacity to manage public perceptions, often at the expense of cultivating deep policy expertise. Presidents want staff who can help package and promote their actions over their more managerially competent counterparts. In sum, these findings suggest that contemporary presidents develop their symbolic capacity in much the same way as members of Congress. They are driven to invest scarce resources in messaging and credit-claiming.

There are, naturally, limitations to this study. Administrative records introduce error, some which remain despite our best efforts. The use of publicly available biographical information may mean our findings are skewed towards staff with more visible public profiles. Addi-

tionally, our analysis spans a period marked by increasing partisan combat and declining congressional capacity, which may affect the generalizability of our results to other historical contexts. We anticipate that future research might improve on the scope and quality of these data, as more records are identified or released. Nonetheless, these data offer a novel window into the staff at the core of the executive branch and the presidents who choose them.

Our study has implications beyond the study of the presidency. By considering presidential capacity alongside Congress, it raises unanswered questions about the separation of powers. Importantly, developments in the kind of capacities available to presidents and members of Congress suggest the historical development of both are linked in underappreciated ways. In addition, future researchers may leverage our data to study the priorities of administrations. Our study investigates how presidents seek to manage public perceptions as evidenced by how they hire individuals with certain skillsets, but future work might more closely examine how or if incentives change throughout the course of administrations or in response to unexpected events, such as a pandemic or economic recession.

Future work might also examine representation in the White House. It has long been thought that the diversity of the people who make up organizations impacts their decisions. Is the same true of the White House? Moreover, instead of looking at Congress as a potential pool from which the White House draws, as we do in this study, future work might examine movement in the reverse direction—how former executive staff with particular skills might be more or less likely to move into federal agencies, legislative offices, advocacy groups or lobbying organizations. Overall, our work opens numerous pathways for investigating the dynamics of the administrative presidency and its broader implications. By continuing to explore these questions, future research can provide deeper insights into the interplay between political incentives, administrative capacity, and effective leadership in the contemporary American politics.

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# Supplementary Information

## Presidential Capacity

Kenneth Lowande and Nicholas Birdsong

### Table of Contents

A. Coding Procedures and Reliability (SI-2)

A. Tabular Results (SI-11)

## A Coding Procedures and Reliability

**\*\*Will need to update based on July 2024 report.\*\***

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](http://whitehouse.gov). In total, the dataset includes information on about 5,800 staff members who worked in the White House between 1995 and 2024, excluding 2002. 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 July 2024, with coding performed by this paper’s authors and eight other University of Michigan 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.<sup>13</sup>

## 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 changes, spelling and transcription errors, individuals with identical names, and similar irregularities. A number of these errors were corrected through manual identification by our coders, although some identification issues may persist.

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 announce-

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<sup>13</sup>Goehring B. Improving Content Analysis: Tools for Working with Undergraduate Research Assistants. *PS: Political Science & Politics*. 2024;57(1):57-63. doi:10.1017/S1049096523000744

ments; 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. I examined this possibility using a binomial regression 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. The AIC indicates that the second model better fits the data, but it shows no significant correlation between missingness and racial category.

### **A.3 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

**Table A.1**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	uncertain	
	(1)	(2)
Salary Share	-0.601*** (0.063)	-0.611*** (0.067)
Year	-0.062*** (0.004)	-0.061*** (0.004)
Republican	0.351*** (0.060)	0.353*** (0.064)
Female	0.246*** (0.061)	0.296*** (0.064)
Pr.Race Asian		10.089 (184.322)
Pr.Race Black		10.873 (184.322)
Pr.Race Hispanic		9.742 (184.322)
Pr.Race White		10.168 (184.322)
Constant	123.532*** (7.703)	111.478 (184.511)
Observations	10,233	8,940
Akaike Inf. Crit.	7,609.244	6,708.156

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

United States Social Security Administration.<sup>14</sup>

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.4 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.

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

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<sup>14</sup>Tzioumis, Konstantinos (2018) Demographic aspects of first names, *Scientific Data*, 5:180025 [dx.doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2018.25]



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. Dichotomous dummy variable 'eri.ascribed' equaled a 1 if the racial or ethnic category was explicitly described and 0 otherwise. If a staffer identifies explicitly with a specific racial and ethnic category, e.g., someone who is a Latino that explicitly identifies as Mexican, we also recorded that more specific information in the 'eri.suppl' variable.

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. Disagreement was slightly higher for the eri.suppl variable, which indicated the staffer's identification with a specific racial or ethnic subcategory. 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.

**Figure A.1**

<b>eri.h</b>	<b>total</b>	<b>no ERI.suppl</b>	<b>pct NA</b>	<b>ERI ascribed</b>	<b>pct ascribed</b>
Asian American or Pacific Islander	336	249	0.7410714	270	0.8035714
Black or African American	968	936	0.9669421	687	0.7097107
Hispanic or Latino	516	427	0.8275194	318	0.6162791
Middle Eastern or Arab American	122	89	0.7295082	92	0.7540984
Native American	29	16	0.5517241	9	0.3103448
Other	5	5	1.0000000	5	1.0000000
South Asian American	242	135	0.5578512	157	0.6487603
Two or More Races	27	1	0.0370370	2	0.0740741
White	7215	7065	0.9792100	7055	0.9778240

Figure A.1 shows the number and proportion of staff whose race or ethnicity were inferred varied by category. Relatively few staffers categorized as white explicitly stated their self-identified race or ethnicity, but nearly all who did also specified a more specific ethnic association, such as Irish. Individuals were explicitly identified as Black or African American in about 30 percent of cases but rarely described in the context of a more specific racial or ethnic subgroup, e.g., Kenyan. In contrast, our coders found that Middle Eastern or Arab Americans and South Asian Americans who worked for the White House tended to either state their identity more specifically, e.g., Afghan or Indian, or not explicitly describe their race and ethnicity at all. Those placed in the "other" category were always ascribed and lacked supplemental detail by virtue of the category's definition. Similarly, information on staff categorized as two or more races were nearly always based on public sources that explicitly stated how an individual identifies.

## A.5 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.6 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. Academic institutions may be public or private, but for simplicity's sake, 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 may be due to differences in how coders interpreted categories, 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, or other unique challenges associated with identifying records of employment 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.

Discussions and periodic clarifications to coding instructions likely improved the data quality over time, especially as compared to the initial test sheets. I performed inter-coder reliability tests, but due to differences in the descriptions of job titles and employers I 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.

## **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 invited 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.

Despite many of the birth year values requiring estimation, 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.

## B Tabular Results

**Table B.1 – Within-Staffer Analysis: White House Recruitment Among Congressional Staff.** Reports point estimates and standard errors clustered by staffer for least squared regressions. The unit of analysis is staffer-year, while the dependent variable is being hired the following year. The number of observations drops in model (3) due to listwise deletion—some staffers work for an office that cannot be tied to a legislator, therefore their commonspace distance is missing.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Hired Next Year		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
ln(Salary)	-0.0003* (0.0001)	-0.0003* (0.0001)	-0.0003* (0.0001)
Senior Role (%)	0.0041** (0.0007)	0.0041** (0.0007)	0.0034** (0.0007)
Policy Role (%)	0.0007 (0.0006)	0.0007 (0.0006)	0.0006 (0.0006)
Legal Counsel (%)	0.0011 (0.0021)	0.0011 (0.0021)	0.0018 (0.0023)
Communications Role (%)	0.0023* (0.0011)	0.0023* (0.0011)	0.0019 <sup>†</sup> (0.0011)
Changed Jobs		-0.0002 (0.0002)	-0.0004* (0.0002)
Commonspace Distance			-0.0032** (0.0004)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>			
Staffer	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>			
Observations	440,985	440,985	402,608
R <sup>2</sup>	0.7981	0.7981	0.7958
Within R <sup>2</sup>	0.0006	0.0006	0.0011

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.1$

**Table B.2 – Between-Staffer Analysis: White House Recruitment Among Congressional Staff.** Reports point estimates and standard errors clustered by staffer for logistic regressions. The unit of analysis is staffer-year, while the dependent variable is being hired the following year. The number of observations drops in model (3) due to listwise deletion—some staffers work for an office that cannot be tied to a legislator, therefore their commonspace distance is missing.

Dependent Variable: Model:	Hired Next Year		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
ln(Salary)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.05)
Senior Role (%)	0.90*** (0.10)	0.89*** (0.10)	0.88*** (0.11)
Policy Role (%)	0.40*** (0.11)	0.40*** (0.11)	0.46*** (0.12)
Legal Counsel (%)	0.81*** (0.16)	0.81*** (0.16)	0.81*** (0.20)
Communications Role (%)	0.76*** (0.14)	0.76*** (0.14)	0.78*** (0.16)
Changed Jobs		-0.03 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Commonspace Distance			1.20** (0.36)
Co-Partisan			1.34*** (0.31)
Commonspace Distance X Co-Partisan			-2.11*** (0.52)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>			
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>			
Observations	440,985	440,985	402,608
AIC	30669	30669	25639

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$