New report provides a comprehensive review of the toughest presidential transition in modern history and outlines needed reforms to safeguard the process

The Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group examined the planning and execution of the 2020–21 presidential transition and make recommendations to strengthen the legal foundation, increase financial support for a range of transition activities, improve agency planning and reform the political appointments process.

WASHINGTON – The nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition® and Boston Consulting Group today released a comprehensive analysis of the most recent presidential transition that examines the successes, challenges and vulnerabilities exposed during one of the toughest transition environments in American history. The report, “The 2020-21 Presidential Transition: Lessons Learned and Recommendations,” also offers proposals to significantly improve the process for future transitions.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, an ailing economy, a nationwide reckoning with racial injustice and an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol were just some of the challenges faced by our institutions as they prepared for the transfer of power on Jan. 20, 2021. Complicating matters further were the early January runoff elections in Georgia that determined control of the Senate, and the unsettled power-sharing agreement between the Senate leadership of both parties.

“The 2020-21 presidential transition tested the durability of our nation’s greatest democratic tradition, and while the process was tumultuous and imperfect, we are now equipped with valuable insights to strengthen and streamline future transitions,” said Valerie Smith Boyd, director of the Center for Presidential Transition at the Partnership for Public Service. “The handoff of power was ultimately successful because of the many professional civil servants and incoming and outgoing officials who worked on the transition. They deserve our appreciation, and we are grateful for a federal workforce so committed to an effective government.”

The report details the extensive and early pre-election planning carried out by Joe Biden’s transition team, areas of cooperation by President Donald Trump’s White House and the critical role played by career agency officials.

According to our analysis, President Trump’s refusal to acknowledge the election results, however, created numerous problems for the Biden team and agency transition coordinators, and demonstrated that while many aspects of the presidential transition are prescribed by law, key elements have been governed by norms and good faith. Changes to the law and new best practices are required to prevent such challenges from occurring during future transitions.
One area of focus in the report is ascertainment and the impact the delay had on the transition. Ascertainment is the process by which the General Services Administration releases resources to the presumptive winner of the presidential election and permits the transition team to interact with federal agencies. In the 2020 election, ascertainment did not occur until nearly three weeks after Election Day, resulting in the post-election transition period being only 57 days instead of 78 days. To ensure that a delay in ascertainment does not interrupt critical transition assistance in the future, the report recommends action by Congress to explore what services could be uncoupled from ascertainment and how agencies could support limited information sharing with still-viable candidates.

The report also calls for extensive reforms to help new presidents get their teams in place on Day One, including a reduction in the overall number of politically appointed jobs that require Senate confirmation. More than 1,200 of roughly 4,000 political appointments require Senate confirmation. The Partnership has found that the pace of Senate confirmations has slowed drastically in recent decades and resulted in increased vacancies, overuse of acting officials and hampered ability by the Senate to conduct its constitutional “advise and consent” responsibilities.

The report calls for detailed contingency planning by transition teams, underscored by the turbulent events of 2020-21 and the possibility of multiple national and global crises that could confront a new president. Additionally, the 2020-21 transition demonstrated the work of experienced career officials was foundational for the success of a transition. Finally, the report details how the reliance on virtual collaboration on an unprecedented scale required by the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges in addition to valuable opportunities for the transition and agency teams.

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The report also calls for important transition-related legislative reforms, including recommendations for Congress to do the following:

- **Expand the authority granted by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 by widening the range of a new administration’s appointees who are eligible for expedited background investigations and security clearances.** These appointees should include those outside Cabinet departments and in presidentially appointed positions that do not require Senate confirmation. By the end of 2021, only 56% of key national security positions requiring Senate confirmation tracked by the Partnership for Public Service had been filled.

- **Consider additional appropriations to support the surge in personnel and resources needed at agencies that experience increased workloads during transition years.** This includes the FBI and other clearance granting agencies for background investigations; the Office of Government Ethics for reviewing financial disclosures and conflicts of interest; and the Office of Presidential Personnel to expedite filling presidential appointments after the inauguration.

- **Consider providing additional appropriations to the General Services Administration for its support of the transition.** Congress should ask the Government Accountability Office to determine the actual expenses required to support a transition in addition to the appropriations provided every four years by Congress, which in past transition cycles have included funding for presidential transition teams, GSA’s support of the outgoing administration and training of appointees.

- **Reaffirm and clarify the Office of Management and Budget’s role as a service provider to transition teams given its responsibility for government-wide planning and budgeting.** OMB
plays a central role in regulatory policy and rulemaking across all departments and agencies while its collaboration is important to facilitate an incoming administration’s development of a budget proposal.

Since 2008, the Partnership for Public Service has served as the nation’s premier nonpartisan source of information and resources designed to help presidential candidates and their teams lay the groundwork for a new administration or for a president’s second term. Our 2010 “Ready to Govern” report on modern transition planning provided a roadmap to formalize and improve the culture, operations and resources of presidential transitions, and we have successfully advocated for a series of amendments to the 1963 transition law that have improved the process. Boston Consulting Group has served as the Partnership’s strategic partner on presidential transitions since 2012. Together, we have supported presidential transition teams in 2012, 2016 and 2020 in the planning and execution of their efforts and created unique and impactful resources, such as the first-ever Presidential Transition Guide and Agency Transition Guide.

During the past 20 years, the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service has been dedicated to building a better government and a stronger democracy. We work across administrations to help transform the way government works by providing agencies with the data insights they need to succeed, developing effective leaders, inspiring the next generation to public service, facilitating smooth presidential transitions and recognizing exceptional federal employees. Visit ourpublicservice.org, follow us @PublicService and subscribe today to get the latest federal news, information on upcoming Partnership programs and events, and more.

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