

Holdovers: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What are the pros and cons of keeping holdover appointees?

A: A transition team should identify top-performing political appointees of the previous administration who carry out key functions and could be an asset to the incoming administration.

This is particularly true for sensitive national security positions and other roles that are important in maintaining continuity of government, guarding against threats to the country and addressing urgent national concerns, whether they be related to the military, economic issues or public health. Incumbent appointees who perform basic management roles—chief financial officers or assistant secretaries for management, for example—also can play a valuable role in helping a new administration hit the ground running.

While holdovers might not be closest to the team of an incoming president, the transition team may find that many indeed are aligned with the new chief executive and that the benefits of continuity of knowledge outweigh any concerns that the holdovers may be “outsiders.”

Also, a president can signal the independence of an office by holding over an appointee. For example, presidents have traditionally held over Senate-confirmed inspectors general to reinforce their stature as nonpartisan watchdogs of government.

Other appointee positions are designed by Congress to bring long-term, nonpartisan continuity to their agencies. The director of the FBI and the archivist of the U.S., for example, have fixed terms that span administrations.

And finally, holdover schemes designed by Congress allow many board members or commissioners to hold over in their positions until a successor is confirmed. Given the lengthy and arduous Senate confirmation process, many board and commission members have been serving well beyond their initial terms. Transition teams should study the holdover rules for each board and commission—especially those with full-time, regulatory responsibilities.

Q: If a Cabinet or senior Cabinet member confirmed under an incumbent president is retained by the president-elect, do they need to be reconfirmed to remain in their position?

A: No. Holdover appointees can remain in their seats without going through the Senate confirmation process again, although they will need to be confirmed if they get promoted or move into new roles.

Q: What is the process for identifying holdovers and keeping them in their positions?

A: The personnel team should work with its agency review teams to identify political appointees who should be invited to stay on temporarily or permanently in the new administration. The incoming White House personnel director should also meet with the outgoing director to discuss logistics of this holdover process, such as which individuals to potentially retain and how to gauge an appointee's interest in continued service. The transition team should address potential holdovers early in the transition, as outgoing appointees are likely to consider employment outside the administration.

Q: What are some recent examples of holdovers?

A: At the Cabinet level, a well-known example of a holdover was Robert Gates, secretary of defense under George W. Bush, who was asked by President Barack Obama to remain in his position.

A president may hold over appointees at many levels, however. Before the 2017 inauguration, President-elect Donald Trump asked about 50 senior Obama administration appointees to remain in their posts to ensure continuity of government. Most were at key national security agencies, including the Defense Department and the State Department, and stayed on for only a few months. There were exceptions, however, including Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., who President Obama appointed to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2015 and was nominated by President Trump for a second term in 2017.