

Appointments, Vacancies and Government IT: Reforming Personnel Data Systems

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INTRODUCTION



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As the 12 year anniversary of the September 11th attacks passed, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) faced a serious crisis. It was not a terrorist attack in the United States. The problem was internal; the issue was administrative. There were an alarming number of vacancies among the top brass in the department. Among the 44 positions, DHS lists on its Leadership webpage, there were 17 vacancies (38.6 percent).

Each of the positions on the Leadership page are critical to the protection of the homeland, but most alarmingly, these included vacancies among the Department's top posts: Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Chief of Staff, Executive Secretariat, and General Counsel. There were also two Undersecretary vacancies and five vacancies at the Assistant Secretary level.

These vacancies raised eyebrows in the homeland security community and in Congress. During his November 2013 confirmation hearings, President Obama's pick to head the department, Jeh Johnson, said "My first priority will be to work to fill the remainder of those leadership positions."² Mr. Johnson understood something fundamental to organizational management: vacancies have performance consequences. The efficacy of the Department of Homeland Security—or any organization—is compromised when positions are vacant, individuals are serving

¹ It is important to acknowledge several people who helped ensure that this paper came to fruition. First, Grace Wallack provided tremendous research assistance for this project. Next, I would like to acknowledge staff at GAO, OPM, the Senior Executives Association, and the Federal Executive Institute. Conversations with Suzanne Logan, Alexis Halley, Bill Reinsberg, Latesha Love, and Laura Lynch were helpful in understanding this topic and the issues surrounding it. Additional assistance was provided by Bill Aurite and Conor Sullivan.

² Quoted in <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/dhs-nominee-would-focus-leadership-vacancies>

double duty as acting officials, and personnel lack the kind of direction permanent managers bring to the table.

Vacancies at DHS in 2013 reached crisis proportions—admittedly for a variety of reasons—and that motivated media, legislative, and private sector attention. In reality, many vacancies exist throughout the executive branch at all times and largely go unnoticed outside of those institutions. Despite a lack of attention, vacancies present serious challenges for the ability of the government to meet its mission and provide the services for which it is charged.

WHY VACANCIES MATTER

Political appointees do more to shape public policy than most members of the public realize. They number around 4,000, serve at the pleasure of the president or agency head, and are spread across almost every agency in the federal government. Despite the size, power, and influence of the appointed corps, most appointees serve their country in quiet, largely anonymous roles, far beyond the eye of the public or the pen of the media.

Because of the central role political appointees play in daily governance, vacancies in these positions can create some real challenges within government. In a sense, political appointees are dynamic players within the executive branch, serving dual roles as both political actors and administrative professionals.

First, appointees are surrogates of the president, there to assist the chief executive in implementing his agenda. Some scholars, like Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman, have described the network of political appointees as a web by which appointees are connected to others in a complex system that links up to the president himself and down to the lowest levels of bureaucracy. It is through this web that presidential goals, interests, and preferences course through all levels and areas of public policy. Many appointees bring to the table political, elected, and/or campaign experience, and employ those skills in the execution of their work.

Second, appointees are administrators and professionals. Beyond politics and presidential water carrying, appointees are there to serve as managers, analysts, policy wonks, communication specialists, budget staffers, etc. They carry out day-to-day administrative tasks, coordinate staff within their portfolio and across programs and agencies, and direct policy decision making that affects the government outcomes.

When vacancies occur, they affect not just the political interests of the president, but the administrative capacity of agencies. Many rightly see cause for concern when there are vacancies for Defense Secretary or Attorney General, and surely, vacancies in those positions are far more consequential than a lower-level appointee. However, as vacancies accumulate,

they present serious challenges to federal agencies' missions. The key, then, is to understand how well the government tracks, assesses, and evaluates data about vacancies among critical decision makers.

Better data mean a better grasp of what government does and how well it performs. In the context of the appointments system in the US, multiple taskforces, working groups, academic studies, and GAO reports have called the system broken and argued for reforms.³ By applying hard data to this area, reformers can offer more thoughtful, informed, and targeted recommendations that will help improve a system that has rightly been called, "a mishmash of political compromises, historical anomalies, and unplanned expansion."⁴

TRACKING APPOINTEE VACANCIES: EXISTING DATA SYSTEMS & CHALLENGES

The government does not lack personnel data tracking systems. Instead, it lacks a comprehensive, systematic one that is effective at tracking and evaluating vacancies. Multiple agencies and institutions compile and maintain a multitude of personnel data systems that serve various (and important) purposes. Each has strengths and weaknesses, but overall, they fail to provide researchers the ability to address critical questions about vacancies. A review of these systems is essential to understanding the depth and breadth of this problem.

Central Personnel Data File

The clearinghouse for data tracking for federal personnel is the Central Personnel Data File (CPDF) compiled and maintained by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). OPM describes CPDF as

"...an automated information system containing individual records for most Federal civilian employees. The system's principal objective is to provide a readily accessible primary data source for meeting the workforce information needs of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), other central management agencies, the Congress, the White House, and the public."⁵

The CPDF offers a wealth of information not just for research but for the human resources needs of the U.S. Government. For issues such as salary, benefits, pensions, etc., CPDF is an invaluable resource for OPM and other agencies.

³ Such reforms have sought to streamline and make uniform paperwork and background check processes, begin transition processes earlier in presidential campaigns, adjust ethics rules, and increase personnel selection staff, among many others.

⁴ National Academy of Public Administration. 1985. "Leadership in Jeopardy: The Fraying of the Presidential Appointments System." Final Report of the Presidential Appointee Project. Washington, D.C.

⁵ The Central Personnel Data File (CPDF) system is an automated information system containing individual records for most Federal civilian employees. The system's principal objective is to provide a readily accessible primary data source for meeting the workforce information needs of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), other central management agencies, the Congress, the White House, and the public.

Because CPDF serves as a human resources tool, it is largely an individual-centered rather than position-centered database. Specifically, data within the system are tracked by employee, and this is a sensible design given its purpose. If the goal is to ensure that individual employees receive the benefits that they deserve, such a system must focus on the employee.

An individual-centered system poses challenges for evaluating vacancies. There is certainly a link between an individual and the position she holds; yet, the system is not designed to evaluate how long a position goes unfilled. This is further complicated by multiple positions—even within the same agency—having the same title. While personnel actions are recorded in CPDF, it is not designed to provide data on the historical trajectory of specific positions.

The Plum Book

More senior positions have additional data reporting systems as well. One widely used resource for data and information on leadership positions in the federal government is the Plum Book. The Plum Book lists executive and policy positions within government. In fact, the document's formal title, "Policy and Supporting Positions," signals its true focus.

The Plum Book has become an invaluable resource for political science, public policy, and public administration researchers. It is widely used by lobbyists, non-profits, and the media. As the leadership directory of the executive branch it provides key information for questions regarding administration and personnel. In fact, within government, the Plum Book serves as a key starting point for presidential transition teams as they start the daunting task of staffing the government.

Despite the esteem with which this document is held, it comes with a number of challenges. First, the Plum Book is compiled once every four years—prior to the start of each presidential administration. In this way, it provides a snapshot of federal government leadership positions at a single point in time. However, there is no ability—using the Plum Book alone—to determine changes in those positions in the interim. For instance, when the list is compiled, the Undersecretary for Rural Development at the Department of Agriculture at the time will be entered into the book. Four years later, the new head of Rural Development will be noted. In between, any change or number of changes in that position will go unrecognized. (Alternatively, if the position is noted as vacant, there is no record of when the position became vacant, or how long after the publication of the Plum Book it was filled.) This presents a challenge to anyone seeking to understand who holds a given position, when positions are vacant and for how long those vacancies occur. To this end, it serves more as a document of personnel authority. That is, it functions as a means of understanding the positions within federal agencies that are authorized by statute or executive order.

In this way, the Plum Book, focused on approximately 7,000 leadership positions, provides a position-centered resource for federal personnel. However, it has its shortcomings. If positions

are created or nullified during a four year period, one can only capture that change by comparing one Plum Book to another. And, if multiple changes happen in that four year period, that information will not be captured by the document at all.

A second challenge the Plum Book presents comes from its information sourcing. The Plum Book, like other personnel data sources, relies on agency reporting. One would expect that agencies would be well aware of the individuals who work for them and the positions within their employ. However, independent analysis suggests that assumption is incorrect. In 2013, the General Accountability Office (GAO) examined the characteristics of presidential appointed positions prior to the Streamlining Act of 2011 and the data collected with regard to those positions. The report entitled, “Characteristics of Presidential Appointments that Do Not Require Senate Confirmation” found glaring errors in reporting from numerous agencies.⁶ These errors ranged from misreporting individuals as political appointees to failing to report people or positions to failing to know the authority to appoint additional staff. As a result, this resource that is viewed by academics, media, and presidential transition teams as a core leadership directory has serious reliability issues, further complicating the ability to analyze federal agency personnel data.

The Executive and Schedule C System

The Office of Personnel Management collects and maintains data for government executives who serve in the Senior Executive Service (career and non-career) as well as Schedule C positions. This system, called the Executive and Schedule C System (ESCS) includes appointees (non-career SES and Schedule C) as well as senior civil servants (career SES). These data are useful in understanding who serves in the upper echelons of government service, while excluding the highest ranking, Senate-confirmed appointees (more on this later). It is the most comprehensive data accounting for non-confirmed appointees and serves as an important resource for both OPM and agencies that employ executives.

However, in conversations with OPM, it is clear that the ESCS has serious data limitations and falls short of functioning as a systematic account of executives. These shortcomings further complicate the ability to track and analyze vacancy data among this group of public workers.

OPM described ESCS as an “executive resources management tool,” rather than a system with a mandate. In effect, while data are compiled on positions and the tool is used to understand legal (statutory or executive) authority for hires, the accuracy or quality of those data is dependent on information from agencies themselves. Agencies can ask OPM for authorization to hire an individual to a position covered under ESCS. After OPM authorizes that a hire can occur, agencies are not required to notify whether they followed through with the hiring.

⁶ GAO Report 13-299R, <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-13-299R>

Agencies also lack consistency in reporting vacancies as they occur. The ESCS often has glaring gaps in its ability to reflect personnel activity broadly. If agencies were consistent in reporting to the ESCS when hires are made and when personnel changes such as transfers, resignations, departures, deaths, etc., occur then the system would be more capable of serving as a data resource both within and without government.

Other organizations, such as the Senior Executive Association, keep additional data on vacancies and placements among Senior Executives. However, those data do not extend to other areas of appointed or GS positions.

Finally, like other personnel systems, the ESCS is more individual- rather than position-focused. Like the CPDF, the individual-centered system makes it difficult to analyze and assess position vacancies, their timing, and their duration, extending that data limitation into leadership and executive levels of government personnel accounting. The result is a data resource focused on a group of federal government leaders that falls short of providing systematic data.

Executive Vacancies Act Tracking System

In 1998, Congress attached a seemingly unrelated provision to the *Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1999*. The language was drawn from a legislative proposal that had previously stalled in the Senate entitled, *The Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998*.⁷ This bill required agencies to notify Congress and GAO whenever a vacancy occurred for a Senate-confirmed position. It also capped the period of time an acting official could serve in that capacity.

As part of the law, GAO established the Executive Vacancies Act Tracking System. Agencies are required by law to report vacancies, their duration, who is acting in the position, and the duration of that officials' acting tenure. In an improvement over other individual-level personnel data systems, this tracking system focuses both on the individual and the position. For example, the system includes a vacancy identification number that allows the tracking of a specific vacancy by position. At the same time, because the law requires limits of tenure on acting officials, the individuals serving in those roles are also tracked.

In many ways, the Executive Vacancies Act Tracking System is a substantial improvement over other personnel data systems in terms of its specificity. However, this system also comes with limitations. First, the system only applies to Senate-confirmed appointees. These actors are the most visible and include the most senior appointed officials in the federal government. However, excluded—among the appointed corps—are the thousands of other political appointees serving in a given administration.

⁷ See "The New Vacancies Act: Congress Acts to Protect the Senate's Confirmation Prerogative." Congressional Research Service, 2 November 1998. Accessed: http://assets.opencrs.com%2Frpts%2F98-892_19981102.pdf

Second, the Tracking System relies on agency-level reporting of data. This reporting is mixed and imperfect. In fact, the public website for the System offers a disclaimer at the top that reads, “Note: This search accesses the vacancy information that federal departments and agencies have submitted to GAO. For this reason, the results may not include all existing vacancies or the most up-to-date information regarding those vacancies.”⁸

This disclaimer is not a random or precautionary alert from GAO. It is based on their own examination of the system. In a May 2001 report entitled, “Presidential Appointments: Agencies Compliance with Provisions of the Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998,” GAO profiles agency compliance issues with the new system. During a nine month period, the GAO report found that 19 percent of vacancies and 24 percent of acting officials’ tenures went unreported in the system.⁹ The report goes on: “Moreover, for about half of the instances that were reported to our tracking system, notification was not received for over 4 weeks after the date of their occurrence. The act requires that this information be reported immediately.”

Once again, a lack of consistent agency reporting jeopardizes the accuracy of an important personnel database. In this case, the Executive Vacancies Act Tracking System is the most detailed, position-specific tracking system for political appointees—even if its coverage is limited. However, serious disruptions in reporting undermine the reliability of its contents and create serious problems for governmental and non-governmental researchers seeking to analyze a variety of topics including vacancies.

FIXING HOW WE TRACK POLITICAL APPOINTEES

The federal government must improve the manner in which it tracks personnel information, particularly for all political appointees. These officials serve in leadership, policy making, advisory, management, and support positions and play important roles in the direction of policy and the daily administration of government. Our inability to evaluate when, how many, how often, and for how long vacancies exist, presents a serious administrative gap. To complicate matters, a system that tracks individuals, rather than positions does not allow us to assess the value and importance of positions. Nor are we able to capture performance metrics within a position in any systematic way. The outcome is a set of limited data systems that offer little relief to a government that seeks to improve, streamline, and become more efficient.

To improve the tracking of political appointees, it is vital to redesign the Executive and Schedule C System to make it more comprehensive, systematic, and position-centered and to build in additional data and reporting requirements. In many ways, an ideal system would blend

8 See <http://www.gao.gov/legal/fedvac/searchcurr.html>

9 Presidential Appointments: Agencies Compliance with Provisions of the Federal Vacancies Reform Act,” Government Accountability Office, GAO-01-701, May 2001, p 4. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d01701.pdf>

many of the existing strengths of the ESCS and the Executive Vacancy Act Tracking System, while implementing additional reforms to tighten gaps in the system and expand its usefulness.

The specific changes necessary involve five steps:

1. Create a Comprehensive Audit of Appointees

One jarring reality in the U.S. Government personnel system is that no one really knows comprehensively how many appointed positions are authorized by statute or by executive order. To some extent, it is known how many political appointees are *currently* serving in government—although GAO and OPM assessments of this number note serious reporting deficiencies from agencies about their own personnel.¹⁰

An audit to determine the number of appointed positions authorized by law, currently filled, and vacant would require a substantial research undertaking that involves a combination of agency reporting; analysis of statutes and executive actions; and analysis of existing salary, hiring, benefits, and personnel classification data. The accuracy of the data should be completed and certified by OPM, GAO, and Congress.

This audit is a necessary means of establishing a new and accurate baseline measure within the government. It will serve as the foundation for the new data system.

2. Expand and Refine the ESCS

The current ESCS system covers non-Senate confirmed political appointees; however, as noted above, the system is insufficient to track critical personnel and vacancy queries. In order to improve upon the system, it should be transitioned away from a solely individual-centered data source and toward one that tracks individual- and position-specific data. It is not that the existing data in ESCS is useless. Rather, it is that those data are not sufficiently comprehensive.

In some ways, allowing the ESCS to look more like the Executive Vacancies Act Tracking System would be ideal. The ESCS should include data about who is specifically serving in individual positions, but also track information about the

¹⁰ Data challenges were described in GAO report 13-299R, entitled, “Characteristics of Presidential Appointments that do not Require Senate Confirmation” as well as in conversations with staff at GAO and OPM.

positions themselves. This would include assigning Position ID Numbers for each appointed position (and if desired, career SES). In agencies with appointees with the same titles, they too would be distinguished as unique Position ID Numbers. In this way, it would be easier to track vacancies when they occur in one or multiple positions and the duration of those vacancies could be determined by regular and date-specific reporting.

Similarly and in a manner consistent with the Vacancies Act Tracking System, vacancies themselves would be assigned a Vacancy ID Number. This Number would help to isolate data for analysis of vacancies specifically and could assist in merging both the Vacancies Act Tracking System and the reformed ESCS when desired. Vacancy ID Numbers and Position ID Numbers can also seamlessly be joined with Individual ID Numbers, either through Social Security Numbers, existing employee ID numbers, or a unique Executive Tracking System ID number so to allow government and non-government entities to understand who is serving in which positions and when.¹¹ Such network-style analysis can assess appointee movement and trajectory.

Beyond identification numbers, personnel changes should be coded by specific date. Other systems that rely on annual or even quadrennial data transmissions can lose very important nuance, particularly in the context of vacancy tracking. In an era of rapidly improving technology, real-time or near-real-time data transmission should be well within reach. At a minimum, date-specific data, regardless of the timing of its reporting and transmission to a new system, should be a reasonable request of any agency.

Finally, a panel of officials from OPM, GAO, Congress, and outside researchers and stakeholders should convene to determine what other appropriate data should be included in a reformed ESCS. The panel should be sensitive to human resource needs of the government and research and transparency needs of the public and academic communities while balancing privacy and feasibility concerns among agencies.

3. Establish Standards for Position Tracking

One concern within agencies like OPM and GAO, and a challenge for data collection, involves position descriptions. In the federal government and

¹¹ Obviously any system that would be open to the public would require some level of de-identification consistent with privacy practices in federal agencies. Surely, one would not want to make appointee Social Security Numbers available to the public, making unique identifier numbers a more appealing option. Under this system, the public could use the unique identifier numbers, while internal government use of such data would have access to both identifiers, allowing for more efficient inter- and intra-agency database communication.

particularly among higher-level leadership and appointed positions, the descriptions of roles can change from time to time or from appointee to appointee. As agencies adjust to policy environments, new media, unique tasks, expanding (or shrinking) jurisdictions, or other administrative changes, personnel assignments and portfolios are also subject to change.

In a personnel and vacancy tracking system, this creates a challenge. Questions arise as to when one job is the same or when it has markedly changed. For example, a Communications Director may be tasked with managing external television, radio, and print media; coordinating internal and external written communications; issuing press releases; and supervising junior staffers. If the position's duties change to include the phrase "directs new media outreach", does it become a new position in need of a new Position ID Number? Most people would answer in the negative.

However, other positions may see quite dramatic changes, by adding, subtracting or transferring substantial portions of duties. To complicate matters further, agencies may have specific sensitivities to what is a major or minor change in position description.

In some instances, Position ID Numbers should be maintained through job description changes. In other instances, Position ID Numbers should be retired and a new Number assigned after the change. Similar concerns and considerations will face Vacancy ID Numbers as changes to descriptions may occur more frequently between position holders, rather than within an official's tenure. To ensure that a uniform set of rules are established by which determinations about the (dis)continuity of a position are made, OPM should commission a working group that selects a variety of human resource and federal agency management/administration officials, the Office of Presidential Personnel, and the Office of Management and Budget. The working group should be composed of a mixture of appointed and career officials and be co-chaired by one of each. This group can make regulatory recommendations to ensure that the system functions consistently and has long-term stability in personnel designations.

4. Develop Mandatory Reporting Requirements

One of the biggest challenges facing current personnel data systems is inconsistent agency-level reporting to agencies collecting the data—often OPM or GAO. The ability of one part of the executive branch to motivate another to

report data is not an easy task, particularly without a legislative mandate. Even with a legislative mandate—as seen in the Executive Vacancies Act Tracking System—smooth reporting is not always feasible.

Under a new system, OPM should promulgate rules that require reporting to the reformed ESCS system to be a mandatory part of any personnel action. Before a hire, transfer, or removal can go into effect, the ESCS requirements must be satisfied. In the event of a resignation or death of an SES or Schedule C employee, closeout processes of that line will require the satisfaction of requirements in the ESCS system.

One way to incentivize the proper reporting would be for OPM to issue a rule or Congress to pass a law stating that before any position can be filled in the event of a vacancy, all backdated data regarding personnel actions must be reported to the ESCS system to the date on which the new system comes online. In that event, agency personnel needs—something critical to any agency—provides the catalyst to induce more consistent agency reporting.

5. Link Appointee Tracking with Performance Data

Redesigning the system that tracks personnel and vacancy information for political appointees would engage an important element of government reform and efficiency: performance evaluations. Appointees covered under the existing ESCS receive performance evaluations if they serve at least one year in their current position. The new system should include data from performance evaluations both at the individual- and position-levels. This will allow agencies a more systematic evaluation of performance among appointees and to examine whether structural or agency-specific issues influence performance.

Appointees often serve in multiple positions or have multiple non-continuous tours in appointed positions. This system will allow agencies and the White House Office of Presidential Personnel streamlined access to performance evaluations of specific candidates. It can also provide additional and critical insight to those making appointed personnel decisions. Over time, government officials can use longitudinal performance data within the same or similar positions to achieve a better understanding of what qualifications or characteristics make an individual more likely to succeed in a given role. Such an addition to the database will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of government and improve the manner in which appointed personnel decisions are made.

The creation of a streamlined yet comprehensive repository for data on appointed personnel in the federal government has several important implications. In a basic way, it helps the federal government staff itself by increasing knowledge of appointing authority within federal agencies. Next, presidential transition teams currently rely on unreliable or incomplete information when assessing the personnel landscape of the executive branch and subsequently filling those positions. This creates serious shortcomings in the ability of a new president to plan and design his new administration. Finally, by linking personnel data tracking with relevant and applicable performance data, the federal government can more competently plan and execute long-term strategies to improve personnel capacity, organization, budgeting, and efficiency.

BETTER DATA EQUALS BETTER REFORMS

A reformed ESCS, as proposed in the previous section, can help refine the design, structure and goals of future proposals to reform the appointments process. Such advances in data collection can dramatically improve two specific, commonly-proposed types of reform proposals. The first involves converting Senate-confirmed appointees to non-Senate confirmed positions (non-career SES or Schedule C), ultimately removing confirmation requirements for certain positions.¹² The second involves converting appointed positions to career positions. Both represent unique challenges and opportunities. Both have also had varying levels of success in terms of implementation, and each can be aided by an enhance ESCS.

The removal of Senate confirmation processes for certain appointees has been hailed as a way of streamlining the process by which agency executives are selected. This has been promoted by the National Academy of Public Administration, the 20th Century Fund Task Force on the Presidential Appointments Process, the Partnership for Public Service, and most recently (with legislative success) from my Brookings colleagues Bill Galston and EJ Dionne.¹³ One challenge in converting confirmed positions to non-confirmed positions is that there is little information about whether there are performance gains or losses through such a transfer. Often, different types of individuals serve in Senate-confirmed versus other appointed positions and performance metrics are limited in assessing whether those differences present challenges for administration.

Moreover, the general basis for the relaxation of confirmation requirements is that it should speed up the processes by which presidents fill vacancies. In reality, we have very little systematic data on vacancy rates below the Senate-confirmed level. As the discussion

¹² To be clear, use of the word “conversion,” for the purpose of this paper simply means transferring an appointed position (not the appointee) to a career position. The conversion of the appointee to a (different) career position—often called burrowing—requires special agency reporting and is outside the scope or interest of this paper.

¹³ <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2010/12/14-appointments-galston-dionne>

above illustrates, even databases that purport to offer insights into this area have severe reliability issues. As a result, an enhanced ESCS, consistent with the recommendations in the previous section, will allow data analytics to be applied to this open question. Reformers can consider vacancy rates by appointee-type. The additional data will also allow reformers to consider more targeted changes that are sensitive to department-, agency-, or program-specific realities. Hypothetically, one agency may have higher vacancy rates among Schedule C appointees for reasons unique to that agency. In that case, converting Senate-confirmed positions to Schedule C positions may only compound existing vacancy issues, not fix them. Another agency may have a better track record with regard to filling lower level appointments, making position conversions or transfers a more appealing reform.

Converting or transferring appointed positions to career positions offers another set of challenges. Such recommendations have come from several sources including the National Academy of Public Administration in 1985 and 1988 reports, and more recently from research by David Lewis in 2012. Lewis notes that in converting appointed positions to career SES positions, “Management positions are ideally suited for experienced persons concerned with long term planning and the agency’s health.”¹⁴

Research suggests that bureaucratic institutions managed by career officials, as opposed to appointed officials, have higher performance levels on average.¹⁵ This finding motivates some to argue that converting appointed positions to career positions will increase efficiency and performance within government agencies, and in general this may be true. Others argue, however, that increased government efficiency is achieved not by converting positions, but by keeping appointees in their positions longer. Anne Joseph O’Connell argues extensively that such an option is viable and offers suggestions on how to advance such a goal.¹⁶ However, motivating appointees to stay often requires heavy legislative lifting or a very charismatic and convincing president or agency head.

While there may likely be efficiency gains in converting appointed positions to career ones, across-the-board or arbitrary conversions can be quite dangerous and counterproductive. Proponents of such reforms are sensitive to this reality. Lewis notes, “Efforts to cut appointed positions must be done judiciously...”¹⁷ An improved ESCS can allow reforms to be targeted and

¹⁴ Lewis, David. 2012b. “Reducing the Number of Political Appointees.” National Academy of Public Administration. *Memos to National Leaders Project*. p. 10.

¹⁵ Lewis, David. 2012a. “The Contemporary Presidency: The Personnel Process in the Modern Presidency.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. 42: 3; Lewis, David and Richard Waterman. 2013. “The Invisible Presidential Appointments: An Examination of Appointments to the Department of Labor, 2001-11.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. 43: 1.

¹⁶ O’Connell, Anne Joseph. 2012. “Decreasing Agency Vacancies.” National Academy of Public Administration. *Memos to National Leaders Project*; O’Connell, Anne Joseph. “Five Myths about Presidential Appointments.” *Washington Post*. 19 July 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/five-myths-about-presidential-appointments/2013/07/19/29b5f50e-efb7-11e2-bed3-b9b6fe264871_print.html Accessed: 15 May 2014.

¹⁷ Lewis (2012a) p. 592.

judicious. Combining comprehensive appointed personnel data with individual- and agency-specific performance measures will allow for targeted reductions in the number of appointees in agencies where such changes will likely translate into performance benefits.

There may be additional reforms that an improved ESCS can provide. In agencies where long-term vacancies in specific appointed positions have little (or perhaps positive) effects on performance, consideration may be given to eliminating the position entirely. Often the conversation around appointed personnel reforms focuses on the re-classification of positions to different types of appointments or to career staff. Little attention is given to an examination of the *necessity* of certain political appointments or appointment authority. Improved data can offer systematic and nuanced data to help start a conversation that can both improve administrative efficiency and reduce budgetary needs.

One final caveat must be added to any discussion of converting appointed positions to career positions. Such conversion can come with substantial budgetary and non-budgetary costs and may not resolve challenges or crises of vacancy rates. First, the conversion will put substantial pressure on the Senior Executive Service to train additional staff, prepare them for their new roles, and continue their education as part of the standard SES processes. Recent Congressional testimony from Carol Bonosaro, President of the Senior Executives Association, noted that “due to budgetary pressures, many agencies are choosing not to backfill key executive positions when vacancies occurred.”¹⁸ Bonosaro goes on to describe serious challenges facing the SES because the current personnel system creates disincentives to become a Senior Executive. Couple that with a tremendous number of SES retirements in the next 10 years may mean that converting appointed positions to the SES would put tremendous strain on an increasingly strained institution.

Appropriations can help alleviate some of the challenges facing the Senior Executive Service; however, in the current budgetary environment additional appropriations—for any institution—are hard to come by. In fact, converting appointed positions to career positions increases costs to agencies in terms of longer term benefits, compounding budgetary problems within agencies.

Funding is only part of the battle, however. There are serious challenges in recruiting and retaining highly talented individuals to SES positions for a variety of reasons. These include poor morale,¹⁹ an outdated personnel system,²⁰ political attacks on the federal

¹⁸ <https://seniorexecs.org/advocacy/congressional-testimony/40-senate-subcommittee-on-the-efficiency-and-effectiveness-of-federal-programs-and-the-federal-workforce>

¹⁹ See the Senior Executives Association 2013 Survey and Report “Deteriorating Pay for Performance Adversely Impacting Morale and Retention within the Federal Career Senior Executives and Professionals Corps” https://seniorexecs.org/images/documents/Deteriorating_Pay_for_Performance.pdf

²⁰ See The Partnership for Public Service’s 2013 Report “Building the Enterprise” <http://ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=228>

workforce,²¹ and the relative appeal of private sectors jobs' salary and benefits.²² These combine to create additional problems for the SES, especially if it is required to add possibly hundreds of converted, formerly-appointed positions to its ranks. This would mean a rapid increase in demand for new SES personnel and a series of forces ensuring enormous limitations in the supply of new SES personnel. This creates a personnel shortage that the federal government is ill-prepared to manage.

Additional data from a reformed ESCS would allow targeted, thoughtful, and systematic planning to transform the appointed personnel system. Only with a revamped database, with accurate and reliable information, can reforms truly address the government's problems within a realistic administrative and budgetary environment.

CONCLUSION

It should be alarming to those in government, to the public, and particularly to researchers, that agencies like OPM and GAO maintain limited data on who serves in leadership and executive positions and the number of positions to which presidents and agency heads can appoint personnel. This is not the fault of either agency, but a consequence of weak legislative mandates and restrictive budgets that limit innovation. OPM has laid out strategic information technology plans to modernize the agency and transform it into a bureaucratic entity ready for the challenges of a 21st century workforce, but those changes come with a price—a price Congress has thus far been unwilling to meet.

Congress must wake up to the reality that the data infrastructure for something as basic as personnel accounting across the executive branch is in dire need of modernization and innovation. Constant Congressional cries of inefficiency, slack, waste, fraud and abuse make for appealing and flashy political statements. Rarely are they backed with the necessary funding to allow government to make necessary changes. It is as if Congress is a homeowner who has a leaky roof, and thinks the best solution is to scream at the roof until the holes are plugged. In reality, the holes keep getting bigger, and the leaks get worse.

Government data systems are no different. The irony is that in some areas of the government, IT systems are among the most technologically advanced and efficient in the world. In other areas they are embarrassingly rudimentary. Personnel data systems fall somewhere in the middle.

21 Hudak, John. "5 Ways Congress Loves to Attack the Federal Workforce," *Government Executive*, November 6, 2013. <http://www.govexec.com/excellence/promising-practices/2013/11/5-ways-congress-attacks-federal-workforce/73265/>

22 Ibid at 19.

The recommendations in this paper would redesign one portion of the personnel tracking system for non-Senate confirmed political appointees. It would merge personnel data with performance data in ways that would help improve the quality of understanding of how agency leadership and management operate. Any elected official committed to improving the function and efficiency of government should be equally committed to expanding and refining data collection and IT infrastructure. Nowhere is this more important than in the context of personnel data.

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