Existential Threat to the Civil Service: Politicization Under Trump

As Joe Biden begins his presidency, his administration is tasked with governing the country through historic interlocking crises, while simultaneously facing an executive branch left in shambles by the Trump administration.

Four years of Trumpism have shown the lethal effects of an incompetent and corrupt federal government. And as The Revolving Door Project has noted, House Democrats' failure to leverage their oversight allowed one of the most corrupt presidents in American history to operate unchecked and consolidate power within the executive branch.

Trump's war on the civil service has hollowed out the government, politicized key agencies, and unraveled the most basic functioning of government in service of the president's own personal gain and that of his wealthy corporate friends.

The transition alone will not shake the ill effects of Trump's war on the civil service. Without serious de-trumpification and civil service revitalization efforts, the opportunity to execute key progressive legislation could be thwarted by the ghosts of the Trump administration.

From what is public knowledge, we see **staffing loss, regulatory erosion, burrowing, manipulation of career hiring**, and **ongoing political appointments** as central barriers to reviving the federal government. In section I we define each of these metrics of politicization. Section II covers the Trump administration's tactics against the civil service. Section III explores specific instances of politicization. Finally, section IV states what the Biden administration must do in the short and long terms to reverse Trump's corruption and rebuild the federal government back better.

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I. Types of Politicization

Staffing Loss

Staffing loss occurs when an agency, either through departures or firings or both, loses members of its workforce who are not replaced by a concurrent match in hiring. Staffing loss fundamentally disrupts the ability of agencies to perform their functions, as they no longer have sufficient workers who are properly experienced to carry out agency functions.

The Trump administration began with a [clear intent](#) to destroy the civil service. One of Trump's first actions in office was a 79-day hiring freeze and an order for the Office of Management and Budget director Mick Mulvaney to reduce the federal workforce through attrition. Though Mulvaney's "Reducing the Size of the Federal Government Through Attrition Act" never got a vote on the house floor, the administration was quickly successful, particularly with higher-level civil servants, in beginning a workforce purge. From 2016 to 2018, [eight percent](#) of the Senior Executive Service were either vacated or remained empty.

Continuous resignations coupled with the Trump administration's sabotage of hiring streams and regular purges of non-loyalists left the federal workforce at a steady decline. Staffing loss diminished the oversight capacity of federal agencies and produced sharp decline in the hiring and retention of women and people of color. The hardest hit agencies in decline of personnel, diversity and morale are the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, Department of the Interior, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Department of Treasury and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Regulatory Erosion

Regulatory erosion is the deliberate, widespread repeal of regulations crucial to fulfilling the mission of government agencies.

The Trump administration took deregulation to new extremes, repealing rules from across government agencies in charge of safeguarding anything from our health and the environment to technology, banking and financial systems.These rollbacks undermined the power of these agencies to fulfill their missions and revealed a clear disdain for a government that protects its denizens. Trump's deregulation put [corporations](#) in the driver's seat of the executing longstanding law.

Burrowing

Burrowing describes the conversion of political appointees to career civil servants. Although this is a routine (albeit controversial) process in previous presidential transitions, an unusually [high number](#) of Trump appointees have converted themselves to serve as life-long career servants.

This could leave Trump loyalists littered through the executive branch posing a grave danger of internal sabotage.

And we're not calmed by the idea "burrowing always happens to some extent." Why? Past burrowers did not come from hyper-corrupt administrations seeking to extend their stay in office through violence.

Manipulation of Career Hiring

Manipulation of career hiring occurs when political appointees or the president interfere in non-partisan hiring processes to install party loyalists rather than the most meritorious candidate. Such manipulation can either be aimed to undermine the agency from within or as graft or both.

In the Bush era, the Department of Justice underwent a manipulation of key career hiring streams that effectively politicized the department as a whole. Per the Inspector General, political appointees took control of the career hiring process and began rejecting candidates deemed to be too liberal. Instead, hiring teams favored those seen as sufficiently conservative, regardless of their qualifications of the rule. The result was an ideologically skewed class of new civil servants, many of whom were against the mission of the departments they elected to serve.

We fear the Trump administration could have followed this Bush-era play book and manipulated the career hiring process across the executive branch. Internal investigations and congressional hearings will be needed to fully reveal any potential manipulation of key hiring streams.

Ongoing political appointments

Political appointees comprise some 4,000 positions in the federal workforce. The president nominates appointees who are then confirmed or rejected by the Senate. Political appointees serve at the pleasure of the president, and they generally are expected to resign before the start of a new administration.

While the vast majority of political appointees leave after the election of a new president, some powerful positions remain in place to serve out the remainder of their terms. Trump loyalists who survived rounds of purges (e.g., US Attorneys and Marshals) as well as political appointments such as the director to the FBI and FHFA could undermine the rule of law and the priorities of the Biden administration if they remain in their positions.

II. How Trump Waged War on the Civil Service

Trump's war on the civil service took an ax to the very notion of a federal government tasked with bettering the lives of its constituents. The Trump administration demonized career federal workers as "deep state" agents. Due to Trump's and his colleagues' efforts, executive agencies, particularly those dealing with issues frequently subject to Trump's ire or relevant to major corporate interests, have lost thousands of qualified and experienced civil servants, leaving our government with massive holes and our nation more vulnerable. At the same time, Trump's anti-government political appointees wreaked havoc on their agencies, tearing up regulations and implementing new ones directly counter to their agencies' missions. And some Trump appointees and associates went further, installing themselves within civil service positions to permanently undermine the proper functioning of government.

From the beginning of his presidency, Trump made apparent his intent to devastate the civil service. Trump initiated a three-month hiring freeze across all agencies at the beginning of 2017 and instructed Office of Management and Budget director and former congressman Mick Mulvaney to reduce the federal workforce through attrition, setting the stage for the administration's approach to the civil service. And the administration was successful, particularly with higher-level civil servants; in the first half of Trump's presidency, the federal government lost 1.5 percent of its scientists compared to an 8 percent increase during the same period of the Obama administration. At the same time, vacancies in Senior Executive Service positions rose to 8 percent, due to higher-than-average departures (voluntary departures were twice as high as seen during the Bush-to-Obama transition) and lower-than-average hiring to fill the vacancies. According to a Government Accountability Office report from June 2020, an astounding 60 percent of new government employees with disabilities left within two years.

Trump's erratic behavior as president also had long-term effects on morale and the ability to build up the civil service. When Congress refused to include $5.7 billion in funds for Trump's US-Mexico border wall in its fiscal year 2019 appropriations "minibus" bills, Trump initially intended to sign the bill anyway. However, he soon changed his mind after a right-wing media pressure campaign criticized him as backing down from his anti-immigration promises. Trump's refusal to sign the bill into law caused a 35-day government shutdown, the longest in US history, affecting about 800,000 federal workers across nine departments and forcing many to work without pay.

The shutdown did lasting damage to federal recruitment. According to a report by the Partnership for Public Service, the shutdown disrupted agency hiring plans, accelerated attrition, and discouraged those previously interested in federal employment from pursuing such work. In particular it affected young workers under the age of 30, many of whom left government service due to the shutdown and who now account for only 6 percent of permanent, full-time federal employees, compared to 21 percent of all private sector employees. Federal workers interviewed for the report indicated that the shutdown, combined with the lack of raises for several years and attacks by government officials, signalled that their work was not valued. A

Government Accountability Office [report](#) found similar effects of government shutdowns on the perception of job instability and recruitment.

Three years into Trump's presidency, the administration continued its war on the civil service. In February 2020, White House spokesman Hogan Gidley [confirmed](#) the administration was seeking to oust workers who were insufficiently loyal to the President. One White House aide, Johnny McEntee, launched a [scorched-earth campaign](#) against government workers, interrogating career employees on their thoughts on Trump administration policies, including ones unrelated to their agencies, and demanding they give McEntee information on any colleagues who weren't sufficiently working to advance Trump's agenda.

Civil service workers are protected from firings based on their political affiliations, but Trump's agency heads often worked around this limitation by reassigning "disloyal" workers to jobs for which they had no relevant experience. And to make it easier to fire employees for cause, Trump passed an [executive order](#), finalized in October 2020, that eliminated the suspension period for federal workers facing termination. While the Trump administration did not successfully finalize the order prior to the Biden administration taking office, the seriousness of Trump's closing attack should not be forgotten.

III. Departments Under Siege

Attrition

While staffing shortages preceded Trump's presidency in many cases, his administration's war on the civil service exacerbated attrition across most agencies, particularly those with missions often subject to Trump's wrath, such as climate change studies, or with direct influence on Trump's and his associates' businesses, such as environmental regulation. Some agencies, like the [Internal Revenue Service](#), had preexisting staffing shortages that accelerated under Trump, while others developed workforce gaps out of whole cloth.

Agencies affected include (in no particular order):

- **Consumer Financial Protection Bureau**: The CFPB suffered its [longest straight loss of workers](#) beginning in the third quarter of 2017 and ultimately lost [four percent](#) of its full-time employees between 2018 and 2019 during its hiring freeze. It also lost senior agency staff, such as [Seth Frotman](#), the former CFPB student loan ombudsman, who resigned due to the Trump administration's undermining of the agency's mission. Meanwhile, consumer complaints to the agency rose [60 percent](#) from 2019 to 2020, and the agency secured only $700 million in consumer relief, less than 13 percent of the $5.6 million in relief it secured in 2015.

- **Department of Agriculture**: The workforce of the Department of Agriculture, one of the largest (and [most underappreciated](#)) executive agencies, declined by [eight percent](#) between December 2016 and December 2019. In the biggest singular instance of attrition, [two-thirds](#) of Economic Research Service and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) employees resigned after Secretary Sonny Perdue instituted his plan to move several agency departments from Washington, D.C. to Kansas City, Missouri. The agencies' relocation left a gaping, 400-vacancy hole in those agencies. In all, NIFA lost 80 percent of its employees.

  This, of course, was the point — as Mulvaney, amazingly, [bragged about](#): "Now, it's nearly impossible to fire a federal worker," he said. "I know that because a lot of them work for me. And I've tried. And you can't do it. But simply saying to the people, you know what, we're going to take you outside the bubble, outside the Beltway, outside this liberal haven and move you out into the real part of the country, and they quit. What a wonderful way to streamline government and do what we haven't been able to do for a long time."

- **Department of State**: State lost [8 percent](#) of its workforce with security, medical, and life safety responsibilities during the hiring freeze imposed from January 2017 to May 2018 and ultimately lost [12 percent](#) of its entire workforce by the end of Trump's presidency. Hundreds of those workers who stayed at State were [reassigned to clerical work](#) in an

attempt to purge career employees protected from arbitrary firings. Other workers suffered retaliation for perceived disloyalty, while political appointees vetted prospective hires for previous work on LGBTQ and Palestinian rights, ruling them out for positions at the department.

- **Department of Housing and Urban Development**: Even before Trump, HUD was suffering from major attrition problems. HUD lost 18.5 percent of its staff between 2008 and 2017, a loss greater than any other cabinet agency during the same period. Rather than alleviating the problem, Trump's HUD bolstered the agency's attrition. A 2018 IG report found that the agency had frequent turnover and vacancies even in high-level positions, while a 2019 GAO report found that the agency now lacks sufficient staff to process Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery applications.

- **Department of Health and Human Services**: As a consequence of the 2017 hiring freeze, HHS suffered from over 700 vacancies at the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health. Such a shortfall likely exacerbated what ProPublica has termed "the fall of the CDC."

  Further, in its fall 2020 semiannual report to Congress, the HUD IG found that the Office of Refugee Resettlement was insufficiently staffed, such that it could not properly ensure the safety of migrant children in HHS custody.

Even at departments relatively free from Trump's attacks, like the Departments of the Treasury, Labor, and Education, staffing still declined. At Treasury, staffing levels at the offices of Domestic Finance, Economic Policy and International Affairs dropped by more than a quarter between 2016 and 2019, while staffing in the terrorism division dropped by a quarter. During a similar period, from December 2016 to December 2019, staffing at the Department of Labor and the Department of Education dropped twelve and fourteen percent, respectively.

Trump additionally targeted specific individuals, particularly those tasked with oversight or who were involved in legal proceedings against Trump's associates. In one instance, Trump fired the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Geoffrey Berman, for investigating Trump's attorney Rudy Giuliani and pushing back against Attorney General William Barr to soften charges against a Turkish bank accused of violating US sanctions law.

Trump's war on Inspectors General (IG), the chief internal oversight officers for executive agencies, is particularly notable. In a span of six weeks at the beginning of 2020, Trump fired five IGs, all for blatantly political reasons:

1. Trump fired Intelligence Community IG Michael Atkinson after complaining that the IG had done a "terrible job" in bringing the whistleblower complaint forward that led to Trump's first impeachment;

2. Trump fired Acting Defense IG Glenn Fine to [disqualify him](#) from continuing to serve as Pandemic IG;
3. Trump fired Acting HHS IG Christi Grimm for [stating that hospitals had insufficient personal protective equipment](#);
4. Trump fired Acting Transportation IG Mitch Behm after Behm began an inquiry into [alleged preferential treatment to Kentucky businesses](#) in the awarding of grants by Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao; and
5. Trump fired State Department IG Steve Linick at the request of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [after Linick had opened a number of ethics investigations](#) into Pompeo's conduct as Secretary.

Unable to fire many career civil servants and with attrition not occurring rapidly enough, the Trump administration further worked to undermine federal agencies by eliminating critical committees. At the Department of Commerce, the administration [disbanded](#) a committee tasked with how to make National Climate Assessments and [closed](#) the Office of the Chief Economist. At the Department of Labor under Secretary Scalia, the administration [dissolved](#) a committee on strengthening OSHA's whistle-blower program. And at Treasury, the administration [stopped](#) the Financial Stability Oversight Council's hedge fund inquiry.

Highly Affected: Department of the Interior

One of the most affected agencies during the Trump administration, the Department of the Interior (DOI) suffered the [loss](#) of thousands of civil servants dejected by the administration's sidelining of its own experts and its efforts to hamper scientific research and destroy public lands.

DOI workers suffered from hiring freezes, work slowdowns, and denigration from agency leadership. In the most devastating instance, the Bureau of Land Management lost [87 percent](#) of its staff after the-Secretary David Bernhardt announced his plans to move the Bureau from D.C. to Grand Junction, Colorado.

Under Bernhardt's predecessor, Secretary Ryan Zinke refused to convene agency task forces for months, prompting 10 of the 12 Park Service Advisory Board members to resign in January 2018 after Zinke had not called a meeting for a year nor sought their advice. After Zinke accused much of the civil staff of being disloyal, the agency [relegated](#) 27 Senior Executive Service (SES) staff, including the director of the Office of Policy Analysis, Joel Clement, to lower-level or otherwise unsuitable positions. Clement later left DOI and filed a whistleblower lawsuit alleging retaliation for speaking publicly about the reality of climate change. The transfers prompted an [Inspector General investigation](#) which found that Zinke had ignored the rules for managing SES members and that he had put political appointees in charge of handling reassignments.

Attrition at the agency was wide-ranging, affecting many major programs. In a 2018 Union of Concerned Scientists poll, about 90 percent of respondents from the National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the US Geological Survey (USGS) said that they had noticed workforce reductions from departures, retirements, and/or hiring freezes. In the same poll, USFWS respondents indicated that the greatest barriers to effective science at their agency were interference by political appointees followed closely by limited staff capacity.

Such staffing shortages left agency workers more vulnerable to political attacks. In a series of instances of political interference at USGS, two senior scientists, Murray W. Hitzman and Larry Meinert, resigned after Zinke requested that they release confidential information from a study on the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska to Zinke's office before the study's publication, violating the USGS's scientific integrity policy.

Highly Affected: Environmental Protection Agency

The Trump administration battered the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), already suffering from major staffing losses over the last two decades. As one of the principal agencies tasked with studying climate change and environmental pollution, the EPA was a particular target for Trump's ire. During the first 18 months of his term, over 1,600 career employees left the agency. In certain programs, turnout skyrocketed; departures on the Board of Scientific Counselors (BOSC), the Clean Air Act Advisory Committee, and the Pesticide Program Dialogue Committee ranged from 62 to 71 percent over the first 15 months of Trump's term (turnover during the same period in Obama's presidency ranged from 0 to 8 percent). By the end of Trump's presidency, 670 career scientists had departed the agency, including 200 who left the Office of Research and Development.

The administration also fought against scientific expertise, prioritizing oil and gas affiliates over scientists. In mid-2017, then-Administrator Scott Pruit dismissed twelve of the BOSC's eighteen members to make room for former industry representatives like Michael Honeycutt, who previously argued against the EPA's ozone rules. Pruitt further moved to restrict membership on the advisory committees by barring anyone who had previously received grant money from the EPA, disqualifying many top scientists for under an extremely dubious justification. As a result of the purges and new rules, top scientific expertise at the EPA dropped precipitously; on the Scientific Advisory Board and the BOSC, the two main scientific advisory committees at the EPA, the percentage of members with academic affiliations fell by 27 percent and 45 percent, respectively.

During the pandemic, staffing shortages had even more deadly consequences. Crucial agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the lead agency responding to the coronavirus crisis, entered the pandemic with thousands of vacancies, including both of its deputy positions, and years of budget cuts.

In one of the most severe cases, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) struggled with low staff and leadership purposefully working to counter the agency's mission. A report from the National Employee Law Project found that in the lead up to the pandemic, the agency had the lowest number of inspectors since 1975 and vacancies in 42 percent of its top leadership positions. Once the pandemic began and OSHA failed to protect workers from unsafe work conditions under former Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia, morale among career employees plummeted. OSHA workers were stymied in their attempts to reinstate an Obama-era initiative to establish a workplace infectious disease safety standard, prevented from conducting workplace safety inspections, and were hamstrung in their COVID-response efforts by a May memorandum that weakened employer reporting requirements of workplace COVID infections and deaths (OSHA rescinded an earlier April memorandum after receiving widespread criticism).

Morale

While not all career public servants left the government during the Trump administration, those who stayed behind still endured the consequences of the administration's attacks in the form of low morale. Although not as dramatic as attrition, low morale can also wreak havoc on the proper function of government, dampening motivation and productivity and stymying future hiring efforts.

Federal employee morale dropped precipitously under Trump, with workers at the DOE experiencing the lowest levels of morale and the biggest drop in morale during Trump's term among all agency workers. Workers at the National Labor Relations Board and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) suffered similarly dramatic drops in morale, while workers at the Departments of Labor, State, Justice, and Agriculture faced moderate drops in morale. Other low morale agencies include the Department of Homeland Security, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the National labor Relations Board.

Rampant Regulatory Repeal

Outside of attacks on civil service personnel, the Trump administration also launched an all-out attack on regulations, attempting to dismantle the functions of federal agencies entirely. In a November 2019 speech before the Federalist Society, Labor Secretary Scalia boasted that the Trump administration had rescinded eight regulations for every one created. As acting director of the CFPB, Mick Mulvaney immediately issued a freeze on new regulations. And Mulvaney successfully scrapped a 34-year-old agreement between the Department of the Treasury and the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) when he wrestled Treasury into giving in OIRA new authority to review tax regulations before they take effect. The new agreement also prevented Treasury from releasing tax regulations until OIRA concludes its review of said regulations.

Much of the attacks on federal regulations focused on ones issued to protect the environment. By the end of Trump's term, the administration had initiated 112 environmental regulatory rollbacks, the plurality of which concerned air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and completed 98 of them. The administration further repealed a dozen other environmental regulations but was forced to reinstate them after courts ruled against the revocations. Because these regulatory repeals are too numerous to name, regulatory changes by the principal agencies, the EPA and the Department of the Interior, are not listed below.

Particularly devastating Trump administration regulations included:

Securities and Exchange Commission
- Amendment to its whistleblower program, narrowing circumstances under which whistleblowers are protected from retaliation.

Health and Human Services
- Rule imposing 5-year review (effective term limits) on senior scientists and policy level directors.
- "Public Access to Materials Underlying Impact Analyses" rule requiring publication of sensitive health data used in decision making.

Department of Education
- Repeal of Obama-era gainful employment rule which protected students from predatory for-profit colleges and universities.

Department of Agriculture
- Rule imposing work requirements for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit recipients (currently suspended due to the pandemic).
- SNAP regulation limiting states' abilities to request time limit waivers and carryover unused discretionary exemptions.

Federal Communications Commission
- Rollback of media ownership rules (currently halted by a federal appeals court but will be shortly reviewed by the Supreme Court).
- Rescission of net neutrality regulation.

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
- Repeal of the mandatory underwriting provisions of the Cordray-era payday lending rule

Burrowing and Schedule F

Trump's greatest attack on the civil service came late in his presidency with the issuance of Executive Order 13957 in October 2020 as a last-ditch effort to permanently undo the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act.

The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 was among the most important reforms in the nation's history. Prior to the Act, presidential administrations would allocate government positions based on a spoils system, in which hiring decisions were based primarily on political affiliation and campaign donations rather than merit. Under the spoils system, new administrations fired broad swathes of government workers upon taking office, replacing them with their own party loyalists. The Pendleton Act, signed into law following President James Garfield's assassination by a disgruntled office seeker, established a segment of federal employees that would be hired based on a competitive hiring process and protected such employees from dismissal or demotion due to political affiliation. In doing so, the Act established the importance of expertise and career public service, enticing people to government work out of national pride and love for their communities and rewarding merit over political connections.

Over a century later, Trump attempted to eradicate the process begun by the Pendleton Act by issuing Executive Order 13957. The order created Schedule F, a new category of federal worker through which the Trump administration hoped to oust any and all public servants unwilling to be corrupted for conservative ideological purposes and replace them with Trump appointees and affiliates.

Under the order, agencies could classify any workers whose duties have a "confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character" and who are not political appointees as Schedule F. Such Schedule F workers were not covered by the Civil Service Rules and Regulations, which includes the rights to due process and collectively bargain. And although Schedule F workers were still protected from firings due to political affiliation, those rules could be easily circumvented by firing an employee officially for other reasons, with a wink and a nod.

Thankfully, Trump initiated Schedule F too late in his presidency and without enough urgency to realize its true devastating effects. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), one of the only agencies which submitted reclassification plans to the White House Office of Administration (OA) for review, intended to reclassify a staggering 88 percent of its workforce as Schedule F. Had Trump rushed the OA to approve reclassifications and OMB Director Russell Vought moved quickly to fire Schedule F workers and replace them with far-right loyalists, the consequences would have been immense, facilitating the loss of public servants with decades of expertise in their fields; disrupting the ability of agencies to continually operate through presidential transitions; subsuming new presidential administrations with hiring hundreds of thousands of new federal workers; and subjugating non-partisan public service to political cronyism once again.

Despite the apparent failure of Schedule F to facilitate burrowing to the degree conservatives hoped, several instances of successful burrowing are worrisome. At the Departments of the Interior and Justice, four and seven political appointees were hired to career civil service positions, respectively. While most of these hirings are likely to low or mid-level positions, one Trump appointee, Lawrence Connell, a political appointee who previously served as Chief of Staff at the VA, was hired to direct a VA Medical Center hospital, a career position. In another instance, Michael Holley, a Trump appointee, successfully moved to a career position in the Office of Intelligence and Analysis at the Department of Homeland Security. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) also appears to have abused its direct hiring authority to move political appointees into positions usually reserved for career civil servants.

OPM is required to review all conversions from political appointments to civil service positions and report conversions to Congress in quarterly reports. However, the OPM has yet to report conversions from the fourth quarter of 2020 to Congress. As the quarter would have covered the period after President Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, it is likely that Trump appointees, seeing the writing on the wall, may have accelerated their attempts to burrow in.

Career Hiring

At numerous agencies, Trump administration figures influenced hiring practices to advance conservative candidates over more qualified liberal ones. According to Dr. Rick Bright, the former Director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, the administration had steadily placed unqualified conservatives throughout the government by first hiring them as federal contractors before converting them to career positions. To facilitate hiring of Trump loyalists, Trump issued several executive orders, including one which lowered experience requirements and changed the hiring process for administrative law judges (who primarily work for the Social Security Administration) away from competitive service to selection by agency heads. Another executive order excepted US Marshals and criminal investigators in the US Marshals Service from the competitive hiring process. And, in a particular suspicious move, Trump's OPM waited weeks later than previous administrations to institute a hiring freeze for senior executive service positions.

Evidence exists of specific Trump loyalists receiving career positions through purportedly apolitical competitive hiring processes. In the last few months of Trump's presidency, the Department of Defense hired former Trump political appointee Michael Ellis as general counsel of the National Security Agency over the objections of the Director of the NSA. And, in January, the Department of State's Office of Global Criminal Justice conspicuously hired nine staffers, many of them alumni of the same evangelical college as the ambassador-at-large, Morse Tan. While Ellis has since been put on administrative leave pending a Defense IG investigation into his hiring, other Trump loyalists must be similarly identified.

IV. What Is Needed to Rebuild

Public service politicization has long-term consequences for all Americans. Congress may pass legislation and President Biden may issue executive actions, but those policies are inactionable without experienced and passionate civil servants. People join public service because they want to serve their country, but interference makes that service impossible. And the threat of political interference from a future administration can make working for an agreeable administration less appealing.

Since taking office, Biden has moved swiftly to reverse Trump's punitive actions against the civil service, including repealing Schedule F, Trump's restrictions on federal employee union officials' use of official time, and Trump's weakening of federal employee protections against dismissal. However, to fix these long-standing problems in the federal bureaucracy, Biden will need to do much in both the short and long terms to remove every last one of Trump's accomplices, protect civil service workers, and rebuild the government workforce.

Short Term

Prioritize hiring and raise morale to discourage turnover. Many federal agencies have suffered from funding cuts, but lack of funding is not always the reason for low staffing levels. Agencies do not have time to wait for additional funding to hire additional workers. Instead, agency leadership should immediately look to fill existing vacancies and expand their workforces where needed to accomplish their respective agency missions. In doing so, agency political appointees must stress the importance of non-partisan work and expertise, ensuring them that the days of Trump are far behind us when it comes to how the Biden administration approaches public servants.

Use all hiring authorities to expand civil service capacity. Federal agencies must utilize every tool in their arsenal to rebuild their workforces. Yet, although agencies have over one hundred hiring authorities, 90 percent of government hirings use only 20 authorities. As we've reported previously, before looking to new hiring authorities, agencies can use the many they already have to hire legal experts, build fellowship and training programs, reinstate former federal employees in the competitive service workforce, and hire workers directly, bypassing a lengthy competitive service exam, where critical needs exist.

Ensure no vacancies in senior staff positions. As part of a well-functioning bureaucracy, political appointees and career civil service workers must work together to achieve their agencies' goals. Trump worked to undermine his own agencies by simply not filling leadership positions, leaving no one with the authority to carry out crucial tasks. Biden must quickly nominate candidates for the hundreds of senior leadership positions and install others to fill the roles on an acting basis until the Senate confirms the nominees.

Fire all remaining Trump loyalists. As available Office of Personnel documents indicate, several Trump political appointees and allies have found their way into civil service positions where they are poised to undermine the government from within. At best, these loyalists will have sat at idly by as Trump separated migrant children from their families, barred individuals from Muslim-majority nations from entering the country, and promoted white supremacist conspiracy theories. Biden must, with the support of a [thorough congressional investigation](#), [find and, when legal, fire](#) every Trump loyalist still in the civil service and replace them with public servants passionate about making the nation better.

Long Term

Reduce the number of political appointees. Although political appointees make up only a small fraction of the federal workforce, their constant churn and open political goals can undermine the proper functioning of government, as demonstrated notoriously by Trump's General Services Administration head, [Emily Murphy](#). Reducing the number of political appointees would clear time that the President and Congress would need to otherwise spend on processing nominations, improve government function, and decrease the future possibilities for political interference. Further, it could be a rare source of bipartisan agreement.

Increase civil service capacity. The federal government workforce has shrunk precipitously relative to the general population over the past half century. More than filling vacancies, Biden must work to undo decades of civil service shrinkage and expand the federal workforce proportionate to the nation's population growth and the increasing duties it must now perform.

Increase agency budgets. Numerous agencies like the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) and the Internal Revenue Service have suffered from major budget cuts due to Republican objections, forcing the agencies to cut staff and limit investigations. Funding agencies properly to conduct the work assigned to them will be crucial to achieve President Biden's bold regulatory plans to combat issues like climate change and economic inequality. Biden must signal his prioritization of increasing agency budgets in his FY 2022 budget and work with the Democratic caucus to ensure these budget increases get through the congressional FY 2022 appropriations packages.