

WHAT PAST AND POTENTIAL APPOINTEES SAY ABOUT THE  
PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENTS PROCESS

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

PAUL C. LIGHT  
VICE PRESIDENT AND DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENTAL STUDIES  
THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

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I am delighted to appear before this committee to speak on behalf of past and potential presidential appointees regarding the state of the appointments process. Speaking from two recent opinion surveys, I can safely attest that past and potential appointees believe the current process is in desperate need of repair. Although the spirit of service is clearly strong, the process for nominating and confirming presidential appointees has become the most significant barrier to accepting the call to service when it comes. To all of us involved in rebuilding the public service, the message is clear: improve the process and more talented Americans will stand ready to serve.

The surveys, which were conducted in 1999-2000 on behalf of the Presidential Appointee Initiative by Princeton Survey Research Associates, offer a mix of hope and frustration regarding the presidential appointments process. On the one hand, they suggest that both past and potential appointees see great honor in serving their country. The vast majority of past appointees would recommend a presidential post to their friends and family, while the vast majority of potential appointees believe that service would generate a host of long-term benefits. On the other hand, past and potential presidential appointees alike view the process of entering office with disdain, describing it as embarrassing, confusing and unfair. They see the process as far more cumbersome and lengthy than it needs to be.

More troubling, both surveys suggest that the presidential appointments process may be failing at its most basic task. It does not give appointees the information they need to act in their best interest throughout the process, does not move fast enough to give the departments and agencies of government the leadership they need to faithfully execute the laws, and produces a less than enviable pool of actual appointees. More than three-quarters of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees interviewed for the Presidential Appointee Initiative rated their colleagues as a “mixed lot,” while only 11 percent considered their colleagues the best and the brightest.

Fortunately, past and potential nominees offered a range of simple solutions for redressing the most destructive of the problems facing the presidential appointment process and building a more persuasive case for service. In a sentence, they urged the president and Congress to simplify the appointments process and make it easier for appointees to return to their previous careers after service. Although these changes would not guarantee a “yes” when the president makes the call to service, they would eliminate some of the most significant burdens that confront the nation’s most talented citizens as they make the choice between accepting a post of honor or just staying home.

### **The Surveys**

Before reviewing these findings in greater detail, it is important to introduce the two surveys that produced the data presented in this statement. The two surveys were conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates on behalf of the Presidential Appointee Initiative, a project of the Brookings Institution funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Both surveys were completed by telephone. The final report on each survey was co-authored by Virginia L. Thomas, of the Heritage Foundation, and myself.

The survey of former appointees came first, and was conducted in the winter of 1999-2000. The survey was designed to examine the actual experience of 435 Executive Level I-IV (Secretary to

Assistant Secretary) appointees who had gone through the process during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton Administrations (1984 through 1999). The sample was limited to those serving in a cabinet department or one of six independent agencies: the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Small Business Administration, the United States Agency for International Development, and the United States Information Agency. These six agencies were selected to assure comparability with a 1985 project by the National Academy of Public Administration that studied appointees from 1964 to 1984. In all, 107 Reagan, 127 Bush, and 201 Clinton appointees were interviewed for this first survey, yielding a 59 percent response rate of those contacted for the study. The respondents were mostly men (81 percent) and over 50 years old (76 percent).

The survey of potential appointees was conducted during the summer and fall of 2000, and focused on civic and corporate leaders. The survey was designed to examine the willingness to serve among individuals who might be, perhaps even should be, asked to serve. The study targeted six elite groups of likely appointees: (1) *Fortune 500* executives, (2) presidents of the nation's top 300 colleges and universities, as ranked by the 2000 *U.S. News & World Report*, (3) executive directors of the nation's largest nonprofit organizations, as measured by donations, (4) scholars at the nation's nine leading think tanks, as identified in a survey of impact and credibility, (5) registered lobbyists at the nation's 117 largest lobbying firms as measured by revenues, and (6) senior state and local officials. Interviews were completed with 100 *Fortune 500* executives, 100 university presidents, 85 nonprofit CEOs, 95 think tank scholars, 100 lobbyists, and 100 state and local government officials. The overall response rate was 29 percent of those sampled and eligible. The demographics of the potential appointees were similar to those of the former appointees surveyed, mostly male (81 percent), over 50 years old (66 percent) and, white (92 percent).

Together, these two surveys provide a unique opportunity to judge the state of the presidential appointments process today. To the extent the process leaves appointees exhausted, embittered, and unprepared for the rigors of service, or discourages talented Americans from ever serving in the first place, it is failing in its most basic obligation to help the president fill some of the most important jobs in the world. The Founders clearly understood that the quality of a president's appointments was as important to the public's confidence in government as the laws that its leaders would enact. "There is nothing I am so anxious about as good nominations," Thomas Jefferson wrote at the dawn of his presidency in 1801, "conscious that the merit as well as reputation of an administration depends as much on that as on its measures." Unfortunately, the merit and reputation of future administrations appear to be imperiled by a process that has calcified and corroded beyond any reasonable justification.

## The Motivation to Serve

The Founders did more than just hope for a government led by the nation’s most talented leaders. They also accepted the call to service themselves. Most had served in public office before traveling to Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention, and most served after. Having argued so passionately for a republic led by citizens, the Founders willingly left their farms, small businesses, law firms, newspapers, and colleges to bring their new government into being.

The two surveys clearly suggest that America’s most talented citizens continue to be motivated to serve. Even as they recognize the sacrifices in service, past and potential appointees have an overwhelmingly positive view of their impacts in office. Indeed, 83 percent of past appointees said they would recommend an appointment to a close friend (table 1), while the same percentage, 83 percent, of potential appointees were favorable toward serving as a presidential appointee (table 2). An overwhelming majority potential appointees (78 percent) said they would find serving an enjoyable experience, and almost all (97 percent) considered an appointment an honor. Over half (57 percent) of these potential appointees think they would gain more respect from family, friends, and neighbors by serving as a presidential appointee than in a senior post outside government.

**Table 1: Recommending Service**

% Recommending that a good friend consider an appointment	Former Appointees (1984-1999)
Strongly recommend	54%
Somewhat recommend	29
Somewhat discourage	7
Strongly discourage	1
N	435

**Table 2: Impressions of Service**

% With a favorable initial impression of serving as an appointee	Potential Appointees
Very favorable	41%
Somewhat favorable	42
Somewhat unfavorable	12
Very unfavorable	4
N	580

### *The Benefits of Service*

The decision to accept the call to service is more than just an assessment of the rewards of service in the short-term. It also involves a calculation of the benefits and costs of service that follow a term in office. Potential appointees clearly recognize the balance. Most (77 percent) felt that they could return to their career after their appointment ended and were not concerned about losing out on promotions in their field (74 percent). Moreover, 83 percent of potential appointees predicted that their service would make them more attractive for future leadership posts. Lobbyists (95 percent), state and local government officials (93 percent) and think tank scholars (84 percent) were most inclined to equate returning from presidential service with career advancement. Almost all of the potential appointees (97 percent) said they would make valuable contacts, which could also be profitable in the future.

While many potential appointees (42 percent) said their salary would be much lower while serving than in their current job, these valuable contacts and the opportunity to advance in their

field may help explain why 61 percent thought serving a president would increase their earning power outside government. Lobbyists (80 percent), local government officials (79 percent), and think tank scholars (72 percent) were most likely to believe that serving a president would increase earning potential later in their career. All three sets of chief executive officers – corporate (46 percent), academic (41 percent) and nonprofit (46 percent) – saw less potential for increased earning power than the other groups. After all, they are already at the top of the salary scales in their industry.

These calculations are confirmed in part by the experiences of past appointees. While 46 percent of the former appointees had a higher salary before their appointment than while serving, only eight percent felt their service decreased their earning power over their career. Twenty percent of the former appointees left their appointment for a higher paying job in the private sector.

It is important to note that not all potential appointees saw the benefits of service. Only 26 percent of potential appointees felt that their ability to make a difference through their work would be much enhanced by serving as a presidential appointee. Nonprofit CEOs (11 percent), university presidents (20 percent), and corporate CEOs (20 percent) were least inclined to think presidential service would significantly increase their ability to make a difference. As two respondents who declined offers to serve explain:

*“I felt I was doing more important work as editor-in-chief.”*

*“I was at a critical point in my prior company’s development and I would have been leaving a bit of work in the change of the company which I thought was quite important.”*

#### *The Costs of Service*

Much as past and potential appointees saw the benefits of service, both past and potential appointees acknowledged that presidential service has burdens that are often heavier than a temporary decline in salary. Nineteen percent of past appointees said burnout or stress was the reason they left service. Of the former appointees, 68 percent found their position stressful compared to other places they worked (table 3). Having most likely come from challenging, senior leadership positions, their comparative assessment of the level of stress as a presidential appointee is particularly troublesome.

**Table 3: Stress as an Appointee**

% Rating stress of appointment compared to other work, on a 1 to 5 scale	Former Appointees (1984-1999)
5 (Very Stressful)	36%
4	32
3	20
2	7
1 (Not stressful)	2
N	435

**Table 4: Impact of an Appointment on Personal Life**

% Rating an appointment's perceived disruption to personal life, compared to other senior, non-government positions	Potential Appointees
Much more disruptive	32%
Somewhat more disruptive	37
Equally disruptive	28
Somewhat less disruptive	2
Much less disruptive	< 1
N	580

Potential appointees also saw presidential service as highly disruptive. Seven in ten said that an appointment would be more disruptive to their personal life than a senior position outside government (table 4). This sentiment was held most firmly among think tank scholars. Almost half of the think tank scholars (47 percent) perceived serving as much more disruptive compared to 25 percent of university presidents, and 29 percent of lobbyists, corporate and nonprofit CEOs. As one civic or corporate leader who declined an offer to serve explains:

*“I had a daughter entering high school and I knew the time commitment would have taken away from that.”*

Living in the Washington, D.C., area is a final barrier to service. Of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees living outside of Washington before their appointment, 36 percent found living in the area a lot more expensive and another 24 percent found it somewhat more expensive. Only 13 percent found the Washington area less expensive than where they lived before serving.

More than half of the potential appointees who lived outside Washington at the time of the survey rated the nation’s capital city a much or somewhat less favorable place to live than their current residence. Although this reluctance is almost certainly linked to the high cost of living and real estate in what has become one of the nation’s most expensive places to live, it is also driven by worries about relocating one’s spouse or partner to a new city. Fifty percent of potential appointees said relocating their spouse or partner would be somewhat or very difficult.

To those who have served and those who may be asked, presidential service requires great sacrifices balanced with great rewards. Taking into account all of the trade-offs, America’s leaders still seem to value presidential appointments. Unfortunately, their strongly negative views of the confirmation process may cause some to bow out before they have a chance to think about what it would be like to serve.

### **Views of the Process**

As noted above, the presidential appointment process exists to recruit and confirm talented citizens for presidential service. As such, it is relatively easy to describe the components of a successful process. It should give nominees enough information so they can act in their best interest throughout the process, move fast enough to give departments and agencies the leadership they need to faithfully execute the laws, and be fair enough to draw talented people into service, while rigorous enough to assure that individual nominees are fit for their jobs. Unfortunately, this is not the process former and potential appointees describe.

*The Burdens of Review*

For past appointees, the process was viewed as unnecessarily burdensome at virtually every step (table 5). At best, the confirmation process is viewed as a necessary evil by those who endured it (47 percent); at worst, it was seen as unfair (by 24 percent). Twenty-three percent of former appointees described the nomination and confirmation process as embarrassing, and another 40 percent as confusing. Half of the Clinton appointees described the process as confusing compared to just a third of the Bush and Reagan appointees.

This consternation is particularly unsettling given the apparent skill with which they were able to master their jobs after their confirmation. Much as they felt challenged by the confirmation process, very few past appointees found any of the substantive aspects of their positions difficult. Over two-thirds found the details of the policies they dealt with and directing career employees fairly easy. Over half found the decision making procedures of their department and managing a large government organization relatively simple.

As troubling as the nomination and confirmation process was for those who actually went through it, the perception among America’s potential appointees sounds an even louder alarm. Fifty-seven percent considered the process a necessary evil and 40 percent viewed it as unfair. The majority of the civic and corporate leaders asked (51 percent) described the appointment process as embarrassing and even more (59 percent) thought it was confusing.

**Table 5: Summarizing the Appointment Process**

% Who say word describes the appointment process very or somewhat well	Former Appointees (1984-1999)	Potential Appointees
A necessary evil	47%	57
Unfair	24	40
Embarrassing	23	51
Confusing	40	59
N	435	580

Some of these opinions were almost certainly based in a lack of adequate information. Just over half of the past appointees (56 percent) said they received enough (40 percent) or more than enough (16 percent) information about the process from the White House or other official

sources. Roughly four in ten (39 percent) said they did not get enough (28 percent) or got no information at all (11 percent). Women (51 percent) were more likely than men (37 percent) to report that they did not get enough information. An overwhelming 77 percent of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees surveyed found the financial disclosure forms less than straightforward.

It is no surprise, therefore, that so many past appointees sought help in the process, thereby compounding the less tangible burdens of being confirmed with the all too real monetary costs. Half of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton nominees said they sought outside help to get through the process, and one in five spent more than \$5,000 in doing so.

### *Delays in the Process*

These frustrations are multiplied by a process that is filled with what past and potential appointees view as unnecessary delays. A nomination and confirmation process lasting more than six months was nearly unheard of between 1964 and 1984. Just 5 percent of those appointees reported that more than six months elapsed from the time they were first contacted by the White House to when the Senate confirmed them.

But times have changed. Nearly a third (30 percent) of the appointees who served between 1984 and 1999 said the confirmation process took more than six months. By the same token, while almost half (48 percent) of the 1964-1984 cohort said the process took one to two months, only 15 percent of the 1984-1999 cohort said the same. Although the delays have increased with each successive administration since 1960, the jump was particularly significant during the Clinton administration. On average, it took Clinton appointees two months longer to enter office than Reagan or Bush appointees.

Past appointees were particularly frustrated by the Senate confirmation process. Almost two-fifths of the appointees who served between 1984 and 1999 felt the Senate confirmation process was too lengthy, an increase from less than a quarter between 1964 and 1984 (table 6).

**Table 6: Sources of Delay in the Appointments Process**

% Who say stage took longer than necessary	Former Appointees (1964-1984) <sup>1</sup>	Former Appointees (1984-1999)
Senate confirmation process	24%	39
Filling out financial disclosure and other forms	13	34
FBI full-field investigation	24	30
White House review	15	27
Initial Clearance with members of Congress	7	18
Conflict of interest reviews	6	17



1 The 1964-1984 figures are drawn from a survey of 532 Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and first-term Reagan appointees interviewed by the National Academy of Public Administration in 1985.

The Senate was hardly the only problem, however. A third of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees also complained that filling out the financial disclosure and other personal information forms (34 percent), the FBI full investigation (30 percent), and the White House review, excluding the president's personal approval, (27 percent) took too long. One former appointee described the frustration of the delays this way:

*“Everybody says, ‘Oh, it’s two months maximum.’ Turned out to be six months. And that’s pretty off-putting because your whole private life is on hold kind of while this is going on.”*

The delays did not affect all levels of nominees equally, however. Secretaries, deputy secretaries, and under secretaries reported fewer frustrations than assistant secretaries. Higher-level appointees were less likely to say the White House review (19 percent versus 31 percent), initial clearance with members of Congress (10 percent versus 20 percent), or Senate confirmation (28 percent versus 43 percent) dragged on too long.

### *Placing Blame*

Past appointees found problems in the process at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Forty-six percent said the Senate was too demanding and made the process more of an ordeal than necessary. The frustration has risen over time. Only 30 percent of the Reagan appointees and 40 percent of the Bush appointees saw the Senate as too demanding, compared to 55 percent of first-term Clinton appointees and 62 percent of second-term Clinton appointees.

Past appointees also found fault with the White House. Thirty percent of past appointees thought the White House was too demanding and made the process more of an ordeal than necessary. Frustration toward the White House has also risen over time. Only 15 percent of the Reagan appointees and 24 percent of Bush appointees saw the White House as too demanding, compared to 36 percent first-term Clinton appointees and 44 percent of second-term Clinton appointees.

Potential appointees also found fault at both ends of the Avenue (table 7). Of the potential appointees surveyed, two-thirds percent felt the Senate asks for too much and 42 percent perceived the White House as too demanding.

**Table 7: Describing White House and Senate Demands**

% Who say each is too demanding, making the process an ordeal	Former Appointees (1984-1999)	Potential Appointees
Senate	46%	66
White House	30	42
N	435	580

Together, these burdens, delays, and pressures have created an appointments process that appears to favor Washington insiders. Half of the 1984-1999 appointees worked inside the Beltway at the time of their nomination, and over a third actually worked in another position in the federal government (35 percent) when they were chosen to serve the president.

Living in Washington does more than provide an easy transition into office, however. It also provides the kind of experience and information needed to survive the current process. Roughly half of the Washington residents among the past appointees surveyed (52 percent) said they knew a great deal about the process at the outset, compared with just a third (31 percent) who lived outside Washington. Forty-nine percent of those whose most recent job was in the federal government knew a great deal about the process compared to 23 percent of those coming from other industries. Although Washington experience allows appointees to more skillfully and smoothly take control of the functions of government, the Founders clearly hoped that presidents would draw upon a talent pool that extended well beyond the nation's capital city. They did not want a government led by a class of semi-professional appointees, but by citizens from every corner and occupation. To the extent the current process favors only candidates with the resources and knowledge that comes from living within a few miles of the White House, a citizen government becomes more an abstract notion than a real possibility.

#### *Explaining the Decline in Timeliness*

The Founding Fathers did not intend the presidential appointments process to be easy. Otherwise they would not have required Senate confirmation as part of their complex system of checks and balances. The question is whether the recent increase in appointee complaints is an appropriate expression of such constitutional obligations or a sign that the presidential appointments process has become a hostage in disputes that are better solved through other means.

These studies cannot offer a definitive answer, if only because the impact of divided control from 1984-1999 has been decidedly mixed (table 8). In fact, appointees reported that some delays were actually longer when the Democrats controlled both the presidency and the Senate, in part because the only moment of unified control during the period happened to come during one of the most haphazard presidential transitions in recent history.

**Table 8: Impact of Divided Government on Delays**

% Former appointees who say stage did not take longer than necessary	Divided 1984-1986	Divided 1987-1992	One Party 1993-1994	Divided 1995-1999
The president's personal approval of nomination	73%	79	59	71
Other White House review Of nomination	69	68	47	50
Filling out financial disclosure and other forms	70	68	67	50
The initial clearance of selection with Congress	78	75	71	63
The conflict of interest reviews	84	78	86	66
The Senate Confirmation process	67	59	59	50
FBI full field Investigation	67	68	57	57
N	67	123	58	102

Just because divided government did not have a strong impact on delays does not mean the Senate confirmation process is working well. To the contrary, it suggests that the delays may have become part of the institutional norms within the Senate that will govern future presidential appointments regardless of party control.

*A Note on Financial Disclosure Requirements and Conflict of Interest Laws*

The Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees were divided over the problems associated with financial disclosure requirements and conflict of interest laws. On the one hand, two in five appointees (41 percent) saw the laws as reasonable measures to protect the public interest, while almost as many (37 percent) thought they were unreasonable. On the other hand, nearly a third of Reagan, Bush and Clinton appointees described the financial disclosure process as somewhat or very difficult.

**Table 9: Describing Financial Disclosure Requirement and Conflict of Interest Laws**

% Rating the reasonability of financial disclosure requirements and conflict of interest laws, on 1 to 5 scale	Former Appointees (1984-1999)	Potential Appointees
1 (Go too far)	18%	5
2	19	14
3	19	22
4	14	27
5 (Reasonable measures)	27	30
N	435	572 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Based on those aware of the financial disclosure forms and conflict of interest laws.

Potential appointees were much less likely than actual appointees to rate the financial requirements and conflict of interest laws as a burden (table 9). The vast majority (81 percent) did not believe it would be difficult to collect and report the information needed to complete the financial disclosure forms, relatively few (16 percent) believed the conflict of interest laws would have much of an impact, and only 19 percent thought they are unreasonable.

The think tank scholars and lobbyists clearly understood enough about the disclosure forms to recognize the burdens involved, while the corporate CEOs sense the potential problems embedded in disclosing their financial holdings. Only sixty-eight percent of think tank scholars and 65 percent of lobbyists thought filling out the financial disclosure forms would be easy, compared to 94 percent of state and local government officials and 89 percent of nonprofit CEOs. Only 34 percent of lobbyists and 41 percent of CEOs thought the conflict of interest laws would have little or no impact, compared to 83 percent of government officials and 81 percent of nonprofit CEOs. The state and local officials were unconcerned (only 9 percent found these rules unreasonable) one suspects in part because they are governed by similar statutes that they already know well and have been spared the problems involved in the acquisition of great wealth.

At least compared to the actual experiences of former appointees, as a group, the potential appointees clearly underestimate the difficulties associated with financial disclosure requirements and conflict of interest laws. This mistaken impression may be the reason potential appointees do not rank these areas as a high priority for reform.

### **Prescriptions for Reform**

There is only so much that the president and Congress can do to improve the odds that talented Americans will accept the call to serve. They cannot move Washington D.C., to say San Francisco, for example, and most certainly should not eliminate the constitutional requirement for the Senate confirmation or the conflict-of-interest protections embedded in federal statutes. Moreover, the Founders clearly expected government service to be inconvenient and a sacrifice, lest elected and appointed officials become so enamored of their jobs that they never go home. “I

will not say that public life is the line for making a fortune,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1808 just before leaving the presidency. “But it furnishes a decent and honorable support, and places one’s children on good grounds for public favor.” But certainly, both the president and Congress can redress some of the drawbacks of service while accentuating its draws.

Past and potential appointees largely agreed on ways to improve the system, starting with providing basic information on how the process works. As already noted, the desire for more information among past and potential appointees is undeniable: 39 percent of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees said they either did not get enough information from the White House or got none at all, while 47 percent of the potential appointees said they knew little or nothing about how the process works. The impact of information, or a lack thereof, is also unmistakable. Past appointees who said they had enough information about the process were more likely than those with little or no information to describe the process as fair and not embarrassing.

Past and potential appointees also agreed on the need for a simpler, faster process. When asked what can be done to make the process easier, 37 percent of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appointees focused on streamlining the process and 28 percent on accelerating action (table 10).

**Table 10: Making the Appointment Process Easier**

% Of former appointees who think the reform would make the process easier	Total	Reagan	Bush	Clinton (1st)	Clinton (2 <sup>nd</sup> )
More efficient information collection	37%	19	38	33	40
Faster process	28	31	23	40	31
Nonpartisan process	11	6	9	9	17
Better communication with both White House and Congressional staff	7	6	4	12	12
Better communication between White House and Senate	2	4	4	0	1
N	435	67	123	58	102

Similarly, 73 percent of the potential appointees said that simplifying the process would make a presidential appointment either somewhat or much more attractive (table 11). The potential appointees also pointed to other reforms that might increase the odds of service, most notably increases in pay and help returning to their previous jobs once their presidential appointment comes to an end.

**Table 11: Making an Appointment More Attractive**

% Potential appointees who say change would make a presidential appointment more attractive	Total	Fortune500 CEOs	University Presidents	Nonprofit CEOs	Think Tank Scholars	Lobbyists	Govt. Officials
Simplified process	73	80	74	72	78	79	58
Better pay	71	57	69	75	72	77	74
Could return to previous job	67	68	70	76	64	70	56
Conflict of interest laws easier to meet	36	53	30	18	29	62	20
Financial disclosure Easier to meet	35	47	33	24	34	46	23
N	580	100	100	85	95	100	100

Where potential appointees stand on reform depends in part on the sector in which they sit. Looking just at which changes would make a presidential appointment much or somewhat more attractive, lobbyists were the most supportive of higher pay (77 percent said the change would make a presidential appointment much more attractive, compared with just 57 percent of corporate CEOs and 69 percent of university presidents). Nonprofit executives were the most supportive of return rights to their previous careers (76 percent said that option would make an appointment more attractive, compared with just 56 percent of state and local government officials).

Although roughly half of the potential appointees said their employers would strongly or somewhat encourage them to take a presidential appointment, the percentages were not uniform across the six groups of civic and corporate leaders. Only 18 percent of the nonprofit executives and just 10 percent of the corporate and university executives said their employers would strongly encourage them to take a presidential appointment, suggesting that if they leave, it may not be with the support of their employer. Unfortunately, the majority in all three groups would find service more appealing if returning to their previous job were an option.

Both former and potential appointees agree. Simple reforms, like removing unnecessary bureaucracy, improving access to information, better communication, and working with employers to let their employees serve and return, may help to ensure that the nation’s most talented leaders don’t exit the process before it even begins.

In addition, there is clear evidence from the survey of past appointees that the White House Office of Presidential Personnel often creates more problems than it solves in handling the onslaught of candidates for appointment. This office is often the first point of contact for lower-level appointees, and handles most of the paperwork at key points in the process. If it is not working well, the entire process suffers.

Unfortunately, the office received mixed grades from their primary customers, the appointees themselves (table 13). Asked to grade the helpfulness of the White House Office of Presidential Personnel staff on a range of issues from competence to staying in touch during the process, half or fewer awarded As or Bs. Although appointees gave the office high grades both for competence (50 percent As or Bs) and personally caring whether the appointee was confirmed (46 percent), half gave the office a C (21 percent) or lower (30 percent) for staying in touch during what has become a long relationship.

**Table 13: White House Office of Presidential Personnel Report Card**

% Giving grade to the White House Office of Presidential Personnel	A (Excellent)	B (Good)	C (Average)	D (Poor)	F (Very Poor)
Caring whether you were confirmed	26%	20	18	13	7
Competence	21	29	23	9	3
Responding quickly to your questions	20	23	20	12	4
Devoting enough time to your appointment	19	24	23	11	6
Staying in touch with you during the process	13	21	21	21	9

There were significant differences in performance across the three administrations, however. Clinton appointees were much more critical of the personnel office than either Reagan or Bush appointees, giving the office average or below average grades on all of the questions asked. More than 40 percent of the Clinton appointees gave the office a D or F on staying in touch with them during the process.

### **Making the Case for Service: A Statistical Analysis**

Given all the opinions summarized above, it is useful to ask which, if any, factor into the willingness to serve. Do views of the confirmation process matter? Are individuals who see the honor in service more likely to be favorable toward the president’s call than those who don’t? Do concerns about relocating family make potential appointees less willing to accept an appointment? One way to answer these questions is to subject the data presented above to more sophisticated statistical analysis using a regression model. Simply summarized, regression allows the researcher to test competing explanations for a greater or lesser willingness to serve.

A regression analysis of eleven different measures discussed above clearly suggests that some considerations are more important than others. The eleven measures involved are a mix of impressions about the effects of serving (the extent to which potential appointees saw the honor in serving and a greater impact from that service), impressions of the process (the extent to which potential appointees described the process as fair, confusing, or embarrassing), demographics (gender, age, race, political ideology, and whether a potential appointee had actually been

considered for an appointment in the past), and the ease, or difficulty, associated with relocating a spouse/partner to the Washington, D.C. area. The variables were tested for significance at a 95 percent confidence level.

The regression analysis showed four significant predictors of greater favorability toward service: (1) a sense that the process of appointment is fair, (2) a sense that service would allow an individual to have an impact, (3) a sense that service would be an honor, and (4) the ease with which the potential appointee's spouse could relocate to Washington. The regression analysis shows, however, that the honor to serve is overwhelmingly more important as a predictor of service than any other measure, and therefore should be emphasized above all else. Moreover, spousal relocation, while an interesting variable to consider, is not all that important, and can be ignored as a concern, especially when the spouse/partner is in the medical, legal, or literary research fields. There is no consequence, for example, involved in prohibiting spousal/partner relocation in the real estate and entertainment industry.

Although it may be impossible to ease the challenges of relocating families to Washington, D.C., the regression offers several ways the government could improve the image of serving. First, presidents and the Senate should reassure candidates that they are committed to building an appointments process that is both reasonable and fair, including visible, substantial reform in how the process works.

Second, presidents should talk incessantly about the impact of presidential appointees on the nation. Doing so emphasizes one of the great advantages of public versus private or nonprofit service: it enhances the ability of one person to make a very large difference, indeed. As mentioned earlier, only 26 percent of civic and corporate leaders believe that their ability to make a difference through their work would be greatly enhanced by serving as a presidential appointee. People tapped for presidential appointments are likely to be at the top of their fields, steering major universities, directing nonprofits and businesses in which they believe, advocating for the issues about which they care, doing the research they feel is important, and providing leadership in their state or local government. It is not surprising that these leaders would need to be convinced they could have a more meaningful impact through government service.

Third, presidents should constantly remind appointees of the honor involved in service to one's country. Old-fashioned though it may seem, patriotism and the love of country are still powerful motivators for public service.

## **Conclusion**

There is much to admire in the views of the past and potential appointees inventoried above. America's most talented citizens remain ready to accept the call to serve, are still motivated by the old-fashioned values of patriotism and honor embedded in the Constitutional system created more than two hundred years ago, and recognize the extraordinary difference a single person can make by answering the call to service. The nation can be proud, as well as relieved, that there is such a deep reservoir of readiness to serve in the wake of what has been one of the most partisan, intensely divided periods in recent American history.



Yet, if the spirit of service is willing, the process for nominating and confirming America's most senior government leaders is weak. To the extent the nation wants leaders who represent the great talent and wisdom that resides across all sectors of society and regions of the nation, it must address the growing toll the presidential appointments process takes on nominees for office. Not only must America's civic and corporate institutions be more willing to "let their people go" to Washington for service, the president and Congress must work harder to "let those people come" by creating a simpler, fairer, faster appointments process.