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# Leading the Executive Branch

Strategies and Options for  
Achieving Success

Elizabeth D. Brown, John D. Graham

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particularly Paul Volcker and Eugene and Maxine Rosenfeld



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1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138  
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## Summary

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When a new president takes office, one of his or her first challenges is to exercise control and leadership of the Executive Branch.<sup>1</sup> The president cannot lead the country effectively without a responsive Executive Branch because it is the departments and agencies that help design and implement his key domestic and foreign policies.

The president's limited formal authority over the departments and agencies makes leading them difficult. From the president's perspective, the departments and agencies are the least proximal to him and most inclined to adopt institutional paths independent of his policy agenda. Significant gaps and overlaps in agency responsibilities make it a challenge for him to hold a single agency accountable on a particular issue. Furthermore, the growing size, scope, and complexity of the federal government since the founding of the nation complicate the policymaking process. Thus a new president will strive to ensure that his policy objectives are met by the agency leaders he appoints.

Despite any difficulties the president may face in working with the departments and agencies, he is highly motivated to do so. The president's proposals have a higher chance of surviving the legislative process and being implemented if the departments and agencies help develop and support them.

To work around any constraints they face, presidents developed, over time, a portfolio of strategies to help them lead the departments and agencies. Most importantly, presidents have taken advantage of the Constitution's ambiguity about who should lead the departments and agencies. If the president wants to review a previous agency policy, restructure an agency, or otherwise impose his views on the federal government, he proceeds. If the Congress or courts do not react, the president wins. And he will often win because the majorities needed to challenge the president in Congress are hard to assemble.

Over the course of many administrations, presidents fortified the Executive Office of the President. This occurred primarily through administrative action—for example, by increasing the size and scope of the White House staff. As a result, presidents have gained control of policymaking by shifting the policymaking role away from the departments and agencies and centralizing it in the White House. This strategy of centralizing power among the

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<sup>1</sup> Despite RAND's preference for gender-neutral language, when writing about future presidents, the authors will use the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* hereafter, in order to avoid overuse of phrases such as *he or she*, *him or her*, and *his or her* throughout the rest of this paper.

White House staff became the preferred presidential alternative during the course of the 20th century.

Although somewhat effective, we argue that the rising power of the White House staff may insulate the president from the valuable knowledge and experience in the departments and agencies. This, combined with the unchecked proliferation of departments and agencies, has made it difficult for the president to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with each cabinet member.

The National Commission on the Public Service (also known as the Volcker Commission) suggested that the performance of the Executive Branch could be improved through a comprehensive reorganization plan. Reorganization is intended to redress some of the gaps in the president's current portfolio of strategies by reducing the number of cabinet secretaries and rationalizing the missions of each agency. The Volcker idea may be attractive to a future president who seeks to share the burden of leading our country with a small but capable group of leaders who rival the White House staff in both Oval Office access and policy impact.

If a future president pursues comprehensive reorganization, we argue that a careful inquiry into the lessons drawn from the performance of our current "mega-agencies"—the Department of Defense, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Homeland Security—is required. A future president should consider comprehensive reorganization as yet another strategy with the potential for accomplishing more-effective leadership of the Executive Branch. However, this type of reorganization will be controversial and difficult to implement and should be initiated early in a president's first term in order to have any realistic chance of congressional cooperation.