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Protecting and Advancing Democracy:
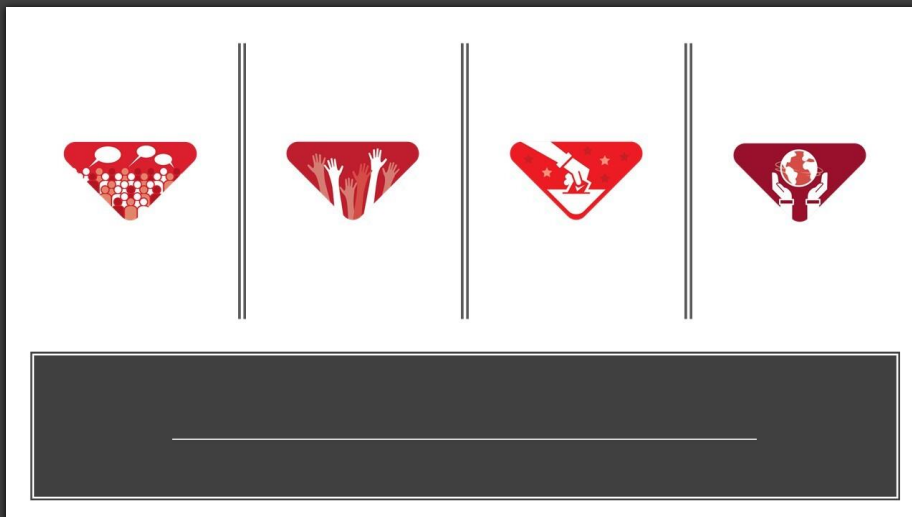
A Spotlight Report

Academy Staff 2021

Working Paper:

Protect Electoral Integrity and Enhance Voter Participation

Modernize and Reinvigorate the Public Service

Develop New Approaches to Public Governance and Engagement

Advance National Interests in a Changing Global Context

Spotlight Report on Managing Protecting & Advancing Democracy

INTRODUCTION

In November 2019, the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) announced 12 Grand Challenges in Public Administration after a year of intense research under the guidance of a Steering Committee from across the field.

Table 1. Grand Challenges in Public Administration

Focus Area	Grand Challenge
Managing Technological Changes	• Ensure Data Security and Privacy Rights of Individuals • Make Government AI Ready
Protecting & Advancing Democracy	• Protect Electoral Integrity and Enhance Voter Participation • Modernize and Reinvigorate the Public Service • Develop New Approaches to Public Governance and Engagement • Advance National Interests in a Changing Global Context
Strengthening Social & Economic Development	• Foster Social Equity • Connect Individuals to Meaningful Work • Build Resilient Communities • Advance the Nation's Long-Term Fiscal Health
Ensuring Environmental Sustainability	• Steward Natural Resources and Address Climate Change • Create Modern Water Systems for Safe and Sustainable Use

This spotlight report focuses on the 4 Grand Challenges relevant to Protecting and Advancing Democracy:

- Protect Electoral Integrity and Enhance Voter Participation
- Modernize and Reinvigorate the Public Service
- Develop New Approaches to Public Governance and Engagement
- Advance National Interests in a Changing Global Context

In 2020, a group of Academy Fellows developed action plans to advise the Administration in 2021 on key near-term administrative actions to address the Grand Challenges. Within the topic of protecting democracy, the Fellows produced action plans on protecting electoral integrity, modernizing the public service, developing new approaches to public service, and advancing national interests in a changing global context. This working paper follows up on those reports by documenting key actions being taken at various government levels by public administrators to address these challenges. This spotlight report is a work-in-progress that will be expanded upon in 2022, especially through a greater focus on non-federal actions.

The Current State

The US derives its strength from democratic principles, and it has protected and improved upon them to build a more perfect union over time. Looking into a future global environment that is increasingly complex and always changing, the U.S. must not lose sight of its foundation. It must:

- Ensure that its own elections are fair and free of foreign interference;
- Secure the ability and opportunity for every eligible citizen to vote;
- Deliver services to the public consistently, efficiently, and effectively;
- Develop its human talent through workforce programs and advanced hiring practices to ensure the quality of its public servants;
- Enhance public governance and engagement structures to harness the insights of the public and deliver the best public services; and
- Manage in an interconnected world, and partner with likeminded countries to deter those that seek to undermine these democratic principles.

PROTECT ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND ENHANCE VOTER PARTICIPATION

The free and open election of public officials at every level of government is essential to American democracy. Every aspect of the election process including the electoral institutions, procedures, and results should inspire trust from voters. The Digital Age, however, poses new challenges to the electoral system. An era of dis- and misinformation has interfered with voters' perception of, and confidence in, election legitimacy. Recent examples include:

- As states around the country adjusted their election procedures in the global COVID-19 pandemic to ensure every voter was safe and able to participate, information campaigns during the 2020 Presidential election raised questions about the impact of these changes on the integrity of the process;
- Russian interference in the 2016, 2018, and 2020 U.S. elections, including their use of internet trolls, internet bots, and fake news polarized the American public and sew distrust in democratic institutions;[1] and

- Iranian influence operations in the 2020 election targeted registered Democrats with threatening emails from fake accounts.[2]

These attacks focused on dividing the American public, but fortunately, there were no attacks on the technical voting process including voter registration and casting ballots.[3]

Although there were fears that voter participation would be low during this past election due to the COVID-19 pandemic, voters actually turned out in record numbers.[4] Two-thirds of eligible voters cast a ballot in November 2020 compared to the average turnout of about half.[5] This voter turnout is partially attributed to the election law changes that were adopted due to the pandemic.[6] There was also an increase in registered voters, driven mainly by minority voters.

The pandemic proved that election law changes that expand access have the power to dramatically increase voter turnout. At the same time, some have expressed concerns about aspects of the 2020 election. For years, public trust in government has been declining, but after the election, as many as 20-35 percent of voters did not believe the results were accurate.[7] These numbers did not change even after federal agencies, the FBI, and DOJ debunked claims of election fraud. In order to ease election fraud concerns and continue this increase in eligible voter participation, the U.S. must assess and address the vulnerabilities in both its electoral process and the surrounding media environment.

MODERNIZE AND REINVIGORATE THE PUBLIC SERVICE

At all levels of government, it is critical that public administrators deliver effective services to citizens. In the Digital Age, the expectations for government effectiveness, efficiency, and equity are even higher. To maintain the American public's trust, government must improve its human talent through effective hiring, retention, and workforce development practices. It must create an environment where those public servants have the greatest opportunity for success and actively engage their constituents. To solve the country's Grand Challenges, the government must utilize its structure and workforce to gain the most value for its citizenry. Many public agencies, however, are far from this goal. Their challenges include:

- A lengthy and laborious recruiting and hiring process. At the federal level, it takes an average of 106 days to hire personnel for a vacant position;[8]
- An aging workforce;
  - 18.2 percent of employees were eligible for retirement at the end of 2018 and approximately one third will be eligible at the end of 2025.[9]
  - Only 6 percent of federal employees are under the age of 30, while about 45 percent are over 50 years old.[10] In the private sector, 23 percent of the workforce is younger than 30.[11]
- Adapting to the modern workplace. As of June 2021, about half of the federal workforce (nearly 1 million), including agencies located outside of the U.S., were eligible for telework.[12] As the pandemic ends and more private companies accept at least hybrid telework as the norm, potential employees will want that option in the government as well.

The need for highly qualified human talent is critical, but government also needs 21st century governance structures and systems to address challenges more quickly, effectively, efficiently, and equitably. Grant programs, emergency management, and the provision of social, economic, and environmental resources require collaboration with not only other levels of government but also with the private sector and even international actors. Technology innovations can be a huge boon to manage these programs, but agencies must align their organizational structures with that technology to recognize its full potential.

Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in government distrust and division among Americans. The gap has continued to grow as political and social divides further separate the country. The disconnect has been linked to two causes: partisan polarization, and social distrust. Additionally, misinformation and inconsistent policies during the pandemic have further reduced trust between Americans and their federal government. In a recent survey, only 24 percent of Americans agreed that they trusted the federal government to do what is right, compared to nearly 80 percent who agreed in 1964.[13] The lack of trust has practical implications—for example, many members of the public distrusted government officials assessing and directing the pandemic response, leading to fewer people trusting that the vaccine was safe to receive. Trust is essential to a democracy. More effective delivery of services can help increase that trust.

DEVELOP NEW APPROACHES TO PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of government officials at all levels being able to address new challenges quickly, effectively, efficiently, and equitably. The federal government has a fundamental role in addressing policy challenges such as the health and safety of the nation and economic recovery following the pandemic. Maintaining current, high-quality information and insights is critical to developing and implementing successful policies. The government will continue to depend on high-quality information to combat ongoing policy issues such as social justice and climate change. However, the federal government is not the sole source of this essential information. It relies on a wide array of governmental, private sector, and non-profit partners to develop, access, and integrate information that can inform policies to address new and existing challenges facing our nation. [14]

ADVANCE NATIONAL INTERESTS IN A CHANGING GLOBAL CONTEXT

In today's interconnected world, the U.S. cannot protect its democratic principles by isolating itself from the world. The U.S. must partner with its shared-value allies to mitigate external threats that target the safety of the American public, the security of U.S. democratic principles, and the nation's economic welfare. At the same time, addressing climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and future cross-boundary issues requires the U.S. to work with the entire global community. Like many of today's challenges, these threats and actors are intertwined. Often, the U.S. must work with a certain country on one topic while confronting it on another. Adding to the complexity, technology has increased the velocity of change in this environment through

faster travel of materials, ideas, and disease. Public administrators will need to collaborate across different agencies, sectors, and functions in order to solve them.

Securing American Democratic Principles

As the U.S. reinforces its democratic infrastructure at home, it must partner with other democracies to identify and solve the multifaceted challenges to the free and open international order. China, Russia, and many other state and non-state actors continue to disrupt this environment as they assert their own authoritative or extremist ideas over other countries.

China continues to rise and fuel tensions with its neighbors, the U.S., and American allies.

Its increasing power in the security, diplomatic, economic, and technology realms can potentially disrupt the current, free and open international order. If the U.S. and its partners do not counter China, it will undermine democratic principles throughout the world. At the same time, China will be a key partner in addressing climate change.

Russia continues to threaten the stability of the international system by challenging the established borders and political systems of sovereign countries. It seeks to undermine the U.S. and its allies through encroachment on NATO interests as well as continuous dis- and misinformation campaigns.

Although China and Russia may garner the most attention, the U.S. must also consider a multitude of other threats when crafting its security strategy, including:

- The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in the Middle East and the surrounding areas. Iran and North Korea have improved their nuclear weapons programs[15], while Syria had developed chemical WMDs[16];
- Malevolent non-state actors seek opportunity in instability to recruit and spread their extremist ideologies; and
- Technological innovation by all competitors includes enhanced offensive cyber capabilities, hyper-sonic weaponry, and Artificial Intelligence.

Securing the U.S. Economy

Despite the U.S.'s many domestic economic challenges, it was able to use its financial strength to rebound fairly quickly from the COVID-19 pandemic shock relatively. Some of its international partners, however, did not have such a quick recovery. The U.S. trades in a globalized economy and must help reestablish open and secure trade for all of its trading partners in order to reach its full economic potential. The U.S. does have many international partners with whom it can collaborate. The G7, G20, and our other bilateral and multilateral trade agreements offer forums and partnerships for the U.S. to solve these issues. Nonetheless, challenges to the U.S. in this current global economy include:

- Talks of more protective trade policies by different countries;
- Unreliable supply chains;
- Implementation of 5G that ensures security and sovereignty of the consumer-country;

- Common standards of technological innovation, especially in the realm of AI; and
- Common standards of intellectual property rights.

Addressing Cross-border Issues: Public Health and Climate Change

The COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of climate change have already proven that disease and natural disasters are not constrained by borders. It will be critical now and into the future for countries to collaborate on these issues. Countries' views on these matters differ, however, depending on such factors as their current economic development and public health infrastructure relative to the rest of the world, along with their internal domestic political situation.

These security, economic, public health, and environmental challenges are not contained by sovereign borders. American public administrators must keep the entire ecosystem of issues in mind as they make decisions in their respective sectors. Cross-cutting collaboration and communication will be critical to adapt to rapidly evolving situations and crises.

Actions Underway

All levels of government—and the private and nonprofit sectors—are undertaking actions intended to address these Grand Challenges. This section highlights a few illustrative actions, but it is in no way an exhaustive list. It is intended to show some of the types of actions being undertaken.

PROTECT ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND ENHANCE VOTER PARTICIPATION

Executive Order to Promote Access to Voting

- Dictates that agencies should work on plans to improve access to voter registration and election information, such as using their website and social media to share information about how to register to vote, how to request a vote-by-mail ballot, and how to cast a ballot in upcoming elections;[17]
- Calls for the General Services Administration (GSA) to modernize Vote.gov and assist with registration and mail ballots;
- Allows states to request federal agencies as voter registration agencies;[18] and
- Enforces the improvement of voting opportunities for federal employees, disabled persons, active-duty military and overseas citizens, multilingual citizens, federal prison inmates, and Native Americans.[19]

Addressing Digital Vulnerability in the Voting Process

Cybersecurity

The vulnerability of voting process to digital threats has become more prominent in the past few decades. The national cyber security infrastructure is essential to an equitable and voting process and protects this process from outside influence. American data security is vital to a fair election. The Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission are responsible for data security issues.

Executive Order 14208, "Improving the Nation's Cybersecurity," establishes several standards for national cybersecurity. These include defining baseline security standards for software developed and sold to the government, obligating developers to uphold greater awareness of their software, and providing publicly available security data.[20]

An introduced bill could potentially create a Civilian Cyber Security Reserve to take on cybersecurity issues with respect to national security, including elections.[21] The draft bill allows the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense to each establish their own Civilian Cyber Security Reserves temporarily until the GAO assesses the permanency of the reserves. These reserves will be comprised of invited cybersecurity experts who can be deployed when needed.

Funding

One of the hurdles to an obstacle-free election is adequate funding. Especially with the increased digitization of elections, additional funding is needed to ensure the safety, security, and fairness of elections. This was highlighted by the 2020 Working Group when they recommended that the federal government provide financial assistance to state elections. While federal legislation to fund elections is occasionally introduced, there have not been any substantial initiatives with enough support since the Help America Vote Act of 2002.[22] In the March COVID-19 relief package, Congress did dedicate $400 million to election security; however, that does not come close to the $2 billion that the Brennan Center estimates is necessary for America to hold safe and secure elections.[23] While the need for more funding in elections seems obvious, legislative initiatives to allocate additional funds to this cause have not advanced. A House-passed stimulus bill that would have designated $3.6 billion in funds to election regulation was not taken up in the Senate.[24]

The pandemic highlighted several places in which elections need more support. Lack of election funding was exacerbated by the increased need for mail-in voting in the last election. Election workers and mail carriers were overwhelmed by the number of mail-in ballots they received. The delays and issues in some primaries emphasized the need for longer windows to accept ballots and more funds to hire election workers.[25] The pandemic also revealed new issues:

- States were overwhelmed with mail-in ballots and in-person voting,

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- In the 2020 election, threats against election workers reached a concerning level,
- Misinformation in the media about the election process posed new challenges for election workers as well.
    - Brennan Center: 78% of election officials felt that the spread of misinformation on social media has made their jobs more difficult.[26]

Because of the difficulty in administering the last election, many essential government positions remain empty or are only filled temporarily. Election-related positions have actually become more difficult as their workloads increase and more dangerous as misinformation and public unrest spread.[27]

Pending Federal Legislation

In addition to this executive action, Congress is currently debating legislation to establish additional nationwide standards for federal elections. A vigorous debate is taking place on several proposed voting rights bills, including:

- For the People Act of 2021 (H.R. 1) passed by the House of Representatives on March 3, 2021, and a scaled-down version is pending in the Senate.[28] Key provisions include:
    - Automatic voter registration—unless an eligible person declines registration, any eligible citizen who interacts with specified government agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, a public university, or a social service agency, is automatically registered to vote.[29]
    - Nationwide early voting—states would be required to provide two weeks of early voting and an equitable geographic distribution of early polling stations.[30]
    - Same day voter registration—eligible voters would be able to register simply with internet access or a short trip to a registration site.[31]
    - Voters must show some form of identification—though not necessarily a photo ID, in order to vote.[32]
    - States retain the right to determine how they want to handle mail-in voting; without a prohibition on vote-by-mail restrictions.
- The John Lewis Voting Advancement Act:
    - Seeks to reinstate sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that were overturned by the Supreme Court in 2013.[33]
    - Establishes new criteria for determining which states must receive preclearance (preapproval from the DOJ or the U.S. District Court for D.C.) before they can alter voting practices.[34]
    - Sets up a cause of action in court for private parties or the federal government to challenge voting or election rules that are designed to limit minority voting rights or have that effect.[35]

State Actions

- California just became the sixth state to require that active registered voters be mailed a ballot before each election, along with Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and Utah.[36]
- Georgia recently passed a law that grants the state board of elections the power to remove local election officials. It also prohibits people from being allowed to hand out food and water to voters waiting in line.[37]
- Arkansas passed two laws impacting the state's voter ID laws, specifically restricting voters who do not hold government-issued photo IDs from being able to vote.[38] About 11 percent of Americans lack this type of ID.[39]
- A recent Kentucky law prohibits both the governor and secretary of state from changing election laws in case of an emergency.[40]
- Utah has a new law allowing state election officials to cross-reference voter records with death records and eliminate matches.[41]

MODERNIZE AND REINVIGORATE THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Reentry into the Workspace

There have been numerous changes in the civil service at the federal level over the past year. As of November 2021, federal agencies are in the process of finalizing reentry plans for their workers to return to federal workspaces.[42] The Biden Administration instructed agencies to create reentry plans that satisfy collective bargaining obligations, give workers advance notice of workspace changes, and prioritize safety.[43]

The current workplace status set by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is that anyone working on Federal lands, including on-duty federal employees and contractors, is encouraged to wear masks and maintain social distance.[44] In September, the Administration released an Executive Order requiring federal employees to get vaccinated unless they have a documented exemption.[45] OPM has also determined that telework eligible employees should be given maximum telework capabilities.[46] In response to this, many agencies are considering providing more work-at-home and telework options for their employees. For example, the Social Security Administration is reviewing its telework program and expects to increase telework options.[47] However, as of summer 2021, nearly 1.2 million federal employees (about half of the workforce) were not eligible for telework.[48] This includes agencies located outside of the United States and jobs like mail carriers, health and safety inspectors, and scientists, whose work needs to be done in person. Unfortunately, these in-person jobs are rarely included in discussions about the future of work.

The future of work for those who work white collar desk jobs will likely be a combination of work in regular office space and work from home. To address this shift, the General Services Administration (GSA) created Workspace 2030, an initiative that compiles the workplace principles established by 100 experts from 18 different federal agencies.[49] GSA has found that it is most beneficial to continue using spaces that are federally owned, rather than leasing out new spaces, which means agencies will need to modernize their older buildings.[50] GSA has stated that older buildings will be repurposed to suit current technology needs and retrofitted to be as sustainable as possible.[51]

Pay Adjustments for Federal Workers

One of the recommendations from Working Group for the [Modernizing and Reinvigorating the Public Workforce Action Plan](#) was that President Biden should issue an Executive Order that maximizes the use of administrative flexibilities in order to streamline the hiring and payment processes for federal workers. Once this EO was enacted, it was suggested that the Biden Administration should develop a new pay and job classification system that better suits the knowledge-based work of today's federal employees. The only related movement on this recommendation is in Biden's 2022 budget, where he proposed a 2.7 percent on average pay increase for government employees that will need to be approved by Congress as it debates appropriations bills.[52]

Improving the Recruitment and Hiring Process

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and others in the current Administration have been brainstorming better ways to recruit and retain excellent employees in the federal workforce. The Election 2020 Working Group suggested that OPM significantly expand the use of streamlined hiring authorities and adopt modern assessment processes such as video interviews and related tools to identify and hire high-quality candidates. Though these specific actions have not been taken, OPM has been working to reduce burdensome procedures and use more automation tools to speed up the hiring process.[53] OPM also recently stated that it will provide federal agencies with a minimum of 48 tools, flexibilities, and authorities to "advance their human capital objectives and mitigate skill gaps in 80 percent of identified high risk mission critical occupations compared to a 2017 skills gap baseline."[54]

The Biden Administration has been focused on recruiting more workers to the federal workforce to make up for staff shortages caused by previous budget cuts and retirement.[55] For example, in Biden's 2022 budget, the administration calls for a 16% boost in discretionary funds for civilian agencies to "rebuild capacity" and is expected to add approximately 50,000 new full-time employees to the federal workforce.[56,57] As of early November, when this staff working paper was completed, Congress is still debating appropriations bills.

The Election 2020 Working Group also proposed that the federal government should encourage people to pursue public service as a career. The Working Group suggested that the White House,

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with the OPM's help, increase advertising for federal jobs and establish an adequately funded campaign to promote federal career paths. Though the Biden Administration has been promoting the positive impact of federal workers, is has not established a funded advertising campaign nor has there been a change in the way the government advertises its jobs.[58] USAJobs remains the main way to apply for federal positions, though federal jobs can be posted on other job sites such as LinkedIn. However, the Biden Administration has encouraged OPM to compile and develop comprehensive guidance for agencies to adhere to best practices for hiring in anticipation of a surge of new employees joining the federal workforce. Agencies that fall under the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) Act are instructed by the budget to fund talent teams and contribute to a centralized hiring assessment support team aimed at helping ease the process of filling hard-to-fill positions.[59]

The last recommendation from the Working Group instructs OPM to reduce the number of security clearance requirements needed for many government jobs. There has been no movement on this aspect of the recommendations, with little appetite from Congress to tackle this issue.[60] However, OPM is in the process of developing regulations that would make it easier to rehire employees by allowing agencies to rehire employees at a grade equal to their experience level working outside of government, rather than only giving them the grade they had when they left the government.[61] Lastly, OPM is conducting a survey with federal agencies to see what general and technical competencies are needed for federal jobs in order to inform personnel policies; it is expected that this will improve the hiring process.[62]

Protections for Federal Employees

Congress has been involved in a different aspect of improving the federal workforce: the protection of federal employees. President Biden rescinded former President Trump's Executive Order which had enacted Schedule F, and no federal employees were moved into the Schedule F category.[63]

President Biden also rescinded the Executive Orders from 2018 that reduced collective bargaining rights, cancelled diversity and inclusion trainings, and prioritized employee discipline and employers' ability to fire staff.[64] Further, the Biden Administration has undone Trump Administration changes that weakened anti-discrimination protection for LGBTQA+ federal workers.[65] Lastly, President Biden issued multiple Executive Orders instructing agencies to review their policies to identify potential barriers to people of color and underserved communities from accessing federal benefits and opportunities.[66]

In March of this year, the Federal Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 now requires an agency to justify how an employee had unsatisfactory performance both before and during the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP).[67] This gives employees more protection from being removed from their position without being given a chance to improve.

IT Modernization of Federal Agencies

The Biden Administration is in the process of creating the U.S. Digital Corps, a two-year, paid fellowship for IT professionals to provide entry-level technology talent to the federal government.[68] The new Chief Information Officer (CIO) of OPM, Guy Cavallo, proposed a 90-day plan to move the agency to the cloud and brokered a deal with Microsoft to provide free, high-quality IT training for all OCIO employees.[69] He also gave a directive to OCIO employees to take an introduction to the cloud class, even if they are not a tech employee.[70] To help OPM better comply with the cybersecurity Executive Order, Cavallo has sent in two requests that would aid OPM in adopting cloud and zero trust technologies to the Technology Modernization Fund Board,.[71]

Creation and Launch of Evaluation.gov

In response to a need to share information about agencies' priorities and integrate more evaluation into policymaking, OMB created and recently launched Evaluation.gov, a website that will help identify the effectiveness of various federal programs.[72] It is also a convening place for agencies to share their Learning Agendas, Capacity Assessments for Statistics, Evaluation, Research and Other Analysis, and Annual Evaluation Plans with one another, making it easier for the public and stakeholders to access this information.[73] The website is also the home of the Evaluation Officer Council, which will be a forum for interagency collaboration.[74] By creating a space to share resources and information, Evaluation.gov will likely become a useful tool to increase government awareness and effectiveness.

State Actions

California

One state that has been particularly focused on revitalizing its public service is California. California has many groups that work on public administration efforts throughout the state, but one in particular has made strides in improving the state and local government workforce: the Cal-ICMA California Consortium (Cal-ICMA). Cal-ICMA is a state affiliate of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA),[75] and hosts webinars and in-person events for public officials to discuss best practices in public administration. In addition, through one of their programs, Cal-ICMA produced a report about how state and local governments should attract and retain top talent. Their advice included developing homegrown talent, retooling the recruitment process to provide more flexibility, allocating funds for staff training and coaching, and fostering employee engagement.[76]

Connecticut

The state government of Connecticut recently identified that 8,145 executive agency employees (27 percent of all staff) will be eligible for retirement by 2022 and those retirements are expected to leave behind many vacancies.[77] In response to this issue, Governor Lamont hired the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) to come up with innovative ways that the government could improve

the efficiency of its work and successfully recruit new employees to replace the expected loss from retirement. BCG developed the CREATES Project which included recommendations such as modernizing the management of the state workforce, streamlining the hiring process, managing overtime/absenteeism, and optimizing the Connecticut Technical Education and Career System (CTECS) on the administration and teacher level.[78]

DEVELOP NEW APPROACHES TO PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

OMB Information Policy and Use Select Task Force

The Academy formed 2 Election 2020 Working Groups to make recommendations on this Grand Challenge to the Administration in 2021. One of these Working Groups focused on the role of the Office of Management and Budget in advancing information policy. They produced the OMB Information Policy and Use Select Task Force.

Some OMB leaders were put in place within the first few months of the Administration. Shalanda Young was confirmed to be Deputy Director in March and is currently serving as Acting Director of OMB.[79] Jason Miller was confirmed to be Deputy Director for Management in April 2021.[80] The President has not nominated another person to be Director yet.[81]

OMB has taken some actions relevant to the Public Governance and Engagement Grand Challenge. Of greatest importance, there seems to be a concerted effort to reinvigorate the Federal Data Strategy and a requirement that agencies prioritize data assets and projects as described in the Federal Data Strategy to include COVID-19 response data as the highest priority.[82] The federal government has built significant open data capacity over the past decade, recently bolstered by the Foundation for Evidence-based Policymaking Act and the federal data strategy.[83] The 2022 Budget Proposal by President Biden proposes increased funding for data-centric legislation like the Evidence Act and for the Federal Data Strategy to support implementation.[84]

Engaging Americans & Increasing Public Trust

Consistent with recommendations from another Election 2020 Working Group report, Engaging Americans & Increasing Public Trust, the Administration has been utilizing its Office of Public Engagement to make the White House inclusive and accessible. The Office works at the federal, state, and local levels to ensure American voices are heard, and that the President takes recommendations from the public into consideration when the Administration's actions. Representative Cedric Richmond is serving as Senior Advisor and Director of the new Office of Public Administration.[85]

Another recommendation focused on encouraging cross-sector engagement with civil society institutions. The White House put out a statement "Establishing the Fight Against Corruption as

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a Core U.S. National Security Interest" in which, as part of their effort to hold corrupt actors accountable, the government will increase support to grow the capacity of civil society.[86]

Encouraging Cross-Agency Collaboration

The first recommendation of the Enhancing Public Governance Action Plan included the idea that the OMB should direct specified agencies to commit in their strategic planning to a Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) goal to improve the delivery and effectiveness of services to individuals and families through collaboration across multiple human service areas. The White House reinstated requirements for federal agencies to create and track performance goals. The current goals will focus on how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, advance equality, and address climate change. Agencies will provide quarterly progress updates through Performance.gov.[87] HHS collaborates with other Federal departments and agencies on cross-cutting topics.[88] Though not all aspects of this action plan have been acted on, the recommendation for OMB and other central agencies to work together to establish shared knowledge platforms and clearinghouses has been addressed. The OMB is encouraging cross-agency technology and shared service initiatives to operate in a manner consistent with the selection criteria identified under the Technology Modernization Fund.[89]

Relevant Executive Orders

The Biden Administration has put out several Executive Orders that focus on equity and encourage including typically disadvantaged communities to become involved in the federal government. This led to the Office of Management and Budget requesting comments on "Methods and Leading Practices for Advancing Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through Government" in order to comply with the recent Executive Orders and increase coordination, communication, and engagement with community-based and civil rights organizations. Executive Order 13985 is the most significant of these Executive Orders, in that it seeks to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities in the federal government.[90] OMB is addressing these requirements by assessing barriers to equity including: enrollment in and access to benefits and services in federal programs, participation in agency procurement and contracting opportunities, participation in agency grant programs and other forms of financial assistance, and opportunities in policies, regulations, and guidance to address the underlying causes of systemic inequalities in American society.[91] This is part of the Biden Administration's effort to encourage public participation and engagement with the federal government. The Biden Administration's Office of Public Engagement specifically aims to make the White House more inclusive and accessible to the public.[92]

State and Local Actions

At the state and local level, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated efforts to promote public governance:

- During the pandemic, California's government closed all in-person meetings and worked from home, but the government continued to work, and there was a large expansion in social programs. The public's access to government increased in many ways given that they no longer had be present in the state capital of Sacramento to engage with government agencies; everything was online, and people with Internet access could make their opinions heard from anywhere in the state. "This pandemic decentralization served two of California's greatest causes: equity and environmental protection. Before COVID, an individual needed resources—either in time to travel to Sacramento or in money to hire a lobbyist—to get heard by the state government. The pandemic made it possible for officials to see and hear everyday Californians, especially in the working class, as never before."[93]
- Colorado passed a new law called "Strengthening Civics Education", which revises Colorado K-12 educational standards to include instruction in civics and government.[94]
- The New York Legislature passed two measures that ensure that documents are made public prior to public meetings and that minutes from public meetings are posted online in a timely manner.[95]

The Election 2020 Working Group recommended that state and local governments create reusable platforms/tools for use at the local level. The Texas court system has been working mainly virtually since the pandemic began. That increased access to hearings and removed some obstacles.[96] Zoom also created a platform for state/local governments and agencies that allows safe and real-time intergovernmental communication as well as easier access for citizens to meetings.[97] Governments had to provide sufficient IT resources to support increased demand for telework. Although not all employees were eligible for teleworking, it is likely that telework will be continued in many workplaces even after the pandemic.[98]

Private/Nonprofit Actions

More in Common completed a report "Two Stories of Distrust in America," which presents a narrative of the state of trust in American democracy and is supported by the Charles Koch Institute, the Knight Foundation, and the Democracy Fund. It argues that efforts to promote bipartisanship and restore confidence in American institutions should be paired with strategies that rebuild social trust and confidence in American democracy.[99] Their strategies to rebuild trust include providing more opportunities for people to engage in civic life, instilling in people a personal investment in community outcomes, and encouraging policymakers to use local media as their messenger when communicating with the public.[100]

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Though the action plan recommended that states and localities establish citizens' assemblies, little legal action has been taken on that front. However, the "America in One Room" project of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University is an example of an annual citizens' assembly that is created to discuss issues such as climate change and the 2020 election.[101]

The National Civic League is currently in the process of developing the 9th edition of the Model City Charter, encouraging towns and cities to draft and revise their own home rule charters.[102] This updated version will focus more on public participation and equity and will be released in November 2021.[103]

Social media has become a growing hub for civic engagement. Many members of the federal government have social media pages in which they can interact with the public. For example, Senator Jon Ossoff uses TikTok to connect with teenagers and young adults, and many government officials use Facebook and Twitter to interact with the broader public. The Election 2020 Action Plan recommended incentives for individual participation, such as "citizen engagement" accounts, badges, certificates, and bonds. Facebook has 'constituent badges' which people can pin to their profiles to let friends and members of Congress know what district they live in. This is a feature that helps people build civic engagement with their communities.[104]

ADVANCE NATIONAL INTERESTS IN A CHANGING GLOBAL CONTEXT

Security

President Biden's Interim National Security Strategy, released in March 2021, identified the following U.S. priorities[105]:

- Protecting the security of the American people
- Expanding economic prosperity and opportunity
- Realizing and defending the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.

To accomplish these ends the administration will focus on the following ways:

- "Defending and nurturing the underlying sources of American strength, including our people, our economy, our national defense, and our democracy at home,"
- "Promoting a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the U.S. and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions,"
- "Leading and sustaining a stable and open international system underwritten by strong democratic alliances, partnerships, multilateral institutions, and rules."

To accomplish these ways, the Administration will focus on the following means:

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- Reinvigorating the U.S. alliance structure
- Reestablish leadership in international institutions including joining with the international community to tackle the climate crisis and the public health crisis.
- Using diplomacy whenever possible and leaving military intervention as an option of last resort
- Ensure the trade and economic policies benefit all Americans
- Build a "dynamic, inclusive, innovative national economy,"
- Decisively respond to the public health and economic crises unleashed by COVID-19
- Revitalize the U.S. democracy and join with likeminded allies to "revitalize democracy the world over"
- "Invest in the national security workforce, institutions, and partnerships, inspire a new generation to public service, ensure our workforce represents the diversity of our country, and modernize our decision-making processes."

Economic Actions

Build Back Better World is an initiative launched by the Administration and other G7 leaders to mobilize private-sector capital in climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality that[106]:

- Promotes a clear partnership to narrow the global infrastructure gap, which is currently estimated at $40 trillion. The administration will work with other major democracies to deliver this investment;
- Emphasizes a values-driven investment into infrastructure development; and
- Seeks to counter China's One Belt One Road economic policy and allow more countries to critique China's human rights policies.

This initiative aligns with the recommendation of the Election 2020 Working Group's report, The United States in an Interconnected World, to align U.S. effort with those of other nations and the private sector to achieve the UN's sustainable development goals, in particular SDG 16 which calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all, and effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Management Capacity

Although many agencies contribute to the foreign policy of the U.S., this report will highlight status of the State Department. As of August 2021, President Biden has filled 84 percent of SES positions and 74 percent of appointed positions in the State Department.[107] Other positions have not been filled partially due to two main reasons: 1) the person nominated for the position is still awaiting confirmation in Congress, and 2) Biden has stated that he is trying to form a workforce that "looks like America." Including this stipulation in the hiring process may slow it down, although it should ultimately lead to more diverse opinions and views.

A notable still vacant position at the State Department is the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy. This position leads the other public affairs and public diplomacy officers in communication with international audiences and produces valuable input to interagency partners. This position has been filled with a senate-confirmed appointee only a third of the time since 1999.[108]

- E.O. 14027: Establishment of the Climate Change Support Office
  - This office, headed by a director selected by the Secretary of State, will support "bilateral and multilateral engagement to advance the U.S. initiative to address the global climate crisis."[109]

Environmental Sustainability and Public Health

- The U.S. rejoined the Paris Climate Accord and set 2030 Greenhouse Gas Pollution Reduction Target
  - Biden announced a target for the U.S. to achieve a 50-52 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.[110]
- E.O. 14008: Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad
  - Directs the Director of National Intelligence and heads of the Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to produce a report of the security risks of climate change.
- E.O. 13996: Establishing the COVID-19 Pandemic Testing Board and Ensuring a Sustainable Public Health Workforce for COVID-19 and Other Biological Threats
  - Establishes A COVID-19 testing board to ensure a more sustainable public health workforce during the pandemic,
  - Brings test manufacturing to the U.S. when possible,
  - President Biden also announced the COVID-19 response team, which is more focused on vaccination efforts.

  This E.O. aligns with the recommendation of the Academy's Working Group on Advancing National Interests in a Changing Global Context to establish a U.S. global crises response corps, starting immediately with a program focused on health, particularly on COVID-19.

Conclusion

The purpose of this staff working paper was to follow up on the Election 2020 Working Group reports for the federal Administration by highlighting key actions intended to address this Grand Challenge. The Academy staff welcomes Fellow input and advice, especially on steps being undertaken by states, localities, and Tribes. Over the next year, this paper will update the description of federal actions based on the latest information and place a greater emphasis on non-federal actions.

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