

CHAPTER NINE



White House Policy Councils

Michele Jolin and Paul Weinstein, Jr.

WHITE HOUSE POLICY COUNCILS

By Michele Jolin and Paul Weinstein, Jr.

Our next President has a powerful opportunity to measurably improve lives, strengthen communities, and make large-scale progress on our nation's great challenges. He or she will have ready access to the best and brightest policy minds to populate both the White House and the cabinet and as a source of the latest and best research and ideas. The President's policy councils—the Domestic Policy Council (DPC), National Security Council (NSC), National Economic Council (NEC), and the various statutory policy offices such as the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA)—will play a central role in designing and advocating for the policy approaches that will shape the President's success and legacy.

On a daily basis, the President, his or her cabinet, and their policy teams will make choices about, for example, how to remove obstacles to social mobility and harness the best available information to make sure that limited resources are used wisely. Political appointees need to work seamlessly with the policy councils on any issues that are—or could be—a priority to the President, in order to ensure alignment and successful implementation. Political appointees who develop a good working relationship with the policy councils are likely to have more influence in the White House than those appointees who do not spend as much time with the councils. In addition, working closely with the policy councils will assist appointees with enlisting White House support in the implementation of their programs, which impact the lives of millions of Americans.

While members of the President's cabinet are critical to policy making and execution, policy councils have the advantage of proximity—they are, more often than not, steps away from the Oval Office, and policy council staff often have close relationships with other White House officials involved in shaping the President's agenda. Policy council staff may play a gatekeeper role for important policy documents such as the State of the Union or the President's Budget, or the priority of a particular announcement. A close relationship with the policy council staff, and having an understanding their roles, will help you further improve the impact of the President's policy agenda.

Understanding Policy Councils

Maintaining a strong and communicative relationship with the following relevant White House Policy Councils is a key to achieving progress on your agency's major policy initiatives:

- **National Security Council (NSC).** Established in 1947, the National Security Council is “the President's principal forum” for national security

and foreign policy. Similar to the domestic councils, the NSC advises the President on national security and foreign policy and helps coordinate the work of the related cabinet agencies.

Members of the NSC include the Vice President, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State.

In 2009, President Obama approved a Presidential Study Directive-1 recommendation to merge the NSC staff and the Homeland Security Council (HSC) staff into one national security staff under the National Security Advisor. The NSC is now the President's principal forum for considering homeland security matters that require presidential determination. In addition, the NSC now also contains a cybersecurity office, headed by the U.S. Cybersecurity Coordinator, which works closely with the Federal Chief Information Officer, the Federal Chief Technology Officer, and the National Economic Council. The office was created as a result of the administration's 2009 Cyberspace Policy Review.

Over the years, the power and size of the NSC have fluctuated, and during the Bush Administration and President Obama's first term, the Council grew considerably in size. In the last two years, however, there has been a concerted effort to reduce the size of the NSC.

Originally designed to focus on policy development and coordination, the NSC over time became increasingly involved in policy implementation, reaching its zenith during the Nixon Administration. However, in recent years it has refocused more of its efforts on policy development.

- **Domestic Policy Council (DPC).** The White House has had a domestic policy staff since at least the 1960s, but the Domestic Policy Council, as we know it today, was established in 1993 by President Bill Clinton when he split the Office of Policy Development into the DPC and the National Economic Council (NEC). The President chairs the DPC, and members include the Vice President and the domestically-focused cabinet secretaries. It focuses on the President's domestic policy agenda—which includes everything from education to immigration, climate change, health policy, justice, and civil rights, to name a few.
- **National Economic Council (NEC).** The NEC advises the President on U.S. and global economic policy. Like the DPC, the NEC has a director who works in conjunction with heads of cabinet agencies.

The NEC operation is very closely modeled on the NSC. An assistant to the President leads the office with two or more deputies (one who typically focuses on domestic economic policy and the other who focuses on international economic matters), and it is staffed with political appointees who are experts in a range of areas from health care to tax policy. Like the NSC, the NEC has regular meetings with its agency members. Although it has a much smaller staff, the NEC has a much greater number of member agencies than the NSC. Recently, the Council has begun to co-author publicly released papers on policy issues with other White House offices.

Roles Played by the White House Policy Councils

The various policy councils are typically staffed by very accomplished policy experts and leaders. Those working with them should understand the environment in which they operate, as well as the role they play in the White House. Policy councils serve as, among other things:

- Gatekeepers for the President's policy priorities, and at times, the President
- An in-house think tank—generating and vetting ideas
- Executors of the President's ideas and delegators of both information and responsibilities
- More often than not, the final word on policy disputes

The policy councils are very different from other units in the Executive Office of the President or cabinet-level departments. First, they have no programmatic and regulatory responsibilities or specific constituencies beyond the President. This lack of programmatic or regulatory bias can help increase the perceived legitimacy of their role in the policy-making process but can be easily lost if they do not act as “honest brokers” in handling agency disputes.

Second, the staffs of the policy councils are primarily made up of political appointments not subject to Senate confirmation. As such, policy council staffs have the ability to impact the decision-making process during the first days of a new administration. However, while the councils are more flexible, they can also lack the agencies' expertise, and turnover is relatively high, which creates a lack of continuity on policy matters. The lack of expertise provides an opportunity for agencies to influence the councils by providing policy experts in a number of fields to work with the councils.

Finally, each President puts his or her own stamp on the process for making policy and which voices have the most influence, but one constant remains: the increasing complexity of the President's job and the speed at which the administration must work to succeed. The fact that policy councils are typically small groups comprised of close aides to the President, and that their staffs tend to have strong relationships throughout the White House complex, contributes to their significant influence. Unlike the cabinet agencies, the policy councils tend to operate largely out of the public eye, with the exception of the heads of each council often having some public-facing or spokesperson role.

Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication with the White House Policy Councils

Succeeding within the, at times, dizzying inner workings of the executive branch of the federal government requires skillful collaboration, constant coordination, and effective communication, as well as an awareness of the role communication plays in policy deployment.

Executive Office of the President Statutory Offices

In addition to the three White House Councils discussed in this chapter, there are also several important statutory offices within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) with whom agency political executives will also interact. Unlike the White House Councils, the heads of these statutory offices must be Senate confirmed and are asked to testify before Congress on matters of policy. They can also have programmatic, regulatory, or reporting responsibilities. Key statutory offices include:

The Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) is charged with offering the President objective economic advice on formulating both domestic and international economic policy. The Council bases its recommendations and analysis on economic research and empirical evidence, using the best data available to support the President in setting our nation's economic policy. CEA was established by the Employment Act of 1946.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) coordinates federal environmental efforts and works closely with agencies and other White House offices in developing environmental policies and initiatives. CEQ was established by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), with additional responsibilities provided by the Environmental Quality Improvement Act of 1970.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) advises the President on drug-control issues, coordinates drug-control activities and related funding across the federal government, and produces the annual National Drug Control Strategy, which outlines administration efforts to reduce illicit drug use, manufacturing and trafficking, drug-related crime and violence, and drug-related health consequences. ONDCP was established by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988.

The Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) provides the President and his senior staff with accurate, relevant, and timely scientific and technical advice on all matters of consequence; ensures that the executive branch policies are informed by sound science; and ensures that the scientific and technical executive branch work is properly coordinated so as to provide the greatest benefit to society. OSTP was established by the National Science and Technology Policy, Organization, and Priorities Act of 1976.

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) is responsible for developing and coordinating U.S. international trade, commodity, and direct investment policy and overseeing negotiations with other countries. USTR was established as part of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, with additional responsibilities assigned by the Trade Act of 1974.

Adapted from www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop

- **Collaboration.** To be effective in creating or advocating for policy priorities, you should find ways to collaborate with the White House Policy Councils as well as other political appointees, career civil servants across the agencies, and members of Congress and their staff. This collaboration makes for better policy design, but as importantly, it will increase the likelihood of successful execution and implementation.
- **Coordination.** This work also requires coordination to address the host of cross-cutting policy issues (e.g. education, energy, trade, job creation, etc.) and to make sure that policies complement one another. As the President's time is a precious resource and his or her stay in the White House is relatively short, there will also be a natural tension over which policy priorities should take precedence. Policy staff at agencies must work together with their colleagues on the policy councils—including allowing for a complete airing of all sides of an issue when needed—so the President has the best possible information with which to make a decision.
- **Communication.** In order to be an effective advocate for their agencies or issue areas, policymakers at all levels must effectively communicate their policy priorities and how those policies will improve the lives of the American people. Success will also, at times, necessitate frequent collaboration with the White House communications team to ensure that policy priorities are well-timed and relevant to the President's message and to advancing the administration's agenda. In the media-driven world of politics, and increasingly policy, a compelling case for policy priorities and a strong relationship with the White House communications team will help policymakers get their ideas in front of the people who will decide what the President and the entire administration talk about on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. After all, every communications product from the State of the Union Address to the White House daily press briefing requires a foundation rooted in good policy.

Conclusion

The policy councils can make the difference between your success and failure, and you need to develop a good and effective working relationship with them. While you both report to the President, as a practical matter the policy councils have a more direct relationship with the President on a day-to-day basis. If you want to include a proposal in the President's State of the Union address, you will need the sign-off of one of the policy councils. If you want to appeal a budget decision by OMB, you will need a policy council on your side. If you are caught in a policy dispute with another agency, you will need the assistance of a policy council to arbitrate the disagreement.

Michele Jolin is the Chief Executive Officer and co-founder of Results for America. She served as Chief of Staff for the Council of Economic Advisers under President Bill Clinton and as a Senior Advisor for Social Innovation for the Domestic Policy Council under President Barack Obama. **Paul Weinstein, Jr.** directs the Masters Program in Public Management at the Johns Hopkins University. He served as Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of the Domestic Policy Council during the Clinton Administration. He also served as Senior Advisor for Policy Planning and Coordination to Vice President Al Gore.