

White House Decision Making: Crafting Policy, Advancing Nominations, and Managing Crises.

Every White House faces innumerable challenges: daily national security threats, legislative must-dos, policy implementation priorities, personnel and management issues, natural disasters, and public relations crises. How do White House staff, cabinet agencies, interest groups, and the Hill work together (or in opposition) to shape official policy positions? How does the White House win (or lose) nomination and legislative battles with Congress? How does the West Wing formulate its response to man-made and natural crises? This study group will take a look at how prior White Houses have set themselves up to face the challenges they chose, as well as the challenges that chose them.

Session 1: White House 101

In our first session, we will take a look at the organizational structure of the previous White House with an eye towards understanding the basics of what decision making looked like inside those four walls. We will also discuss the functions of the internal coordination, external communication, and policy coordinating bodies in the White House—from the National Security Council to the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and everything in between—in order to better understand how they work together as a team (and how they sometimes don't).

Session 2: Economic Policy During the Obama Years: A Conversation with Jason Furman, former Chief Economist for President Obama

President Obama inherited an economy that was hemorrhaging jobs and on the brink of recession. He left office with 75 straight months of total job creation. This session will be a wide-ranging conversation with one of the key architects of his economic policy: Jason Furman, former Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers. We will take a look at the sort of economic crises and opportunities a White House might face. Specifically, we will spend time on the financial crisis, the stimulus, the economics of health care, and tax policy.

Confirmed Guest: Jason Furman, former Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Obama. Jason spent 8 years in the White House under President Obama, first as the second in command at the National Economic Council, then as the President's Chief Economist.

Session 3: The Paris Climate Agreement: How a White House drives a proactive priority

In this session, we will use the mechanics of the Paris Climate Agreement to drive our understanding of how a White House and Cabinet work together to achieve top priorities. Years in the making, with complicated domestic and international dimensions, the historic agreement was shepherded to completion by our guest speaker, Brian Deese. While we will focus on the Paris Climate Agreement, we might also touch on other items from Brian's White House portfolio, including the 2015 budget agreement and the rescue of the U.S. auto industry.

Confirmed Guest: Brian Deese, former Senior Advisor to President Obama and former Deputy

Director of the Office of Management and Budget. As Senior Advisor to the President, Deese was the White House point person on the climate and energy issues, including the Paris Climate Agreement. He also helped negotiate the 2015 Bipartisan Budget Act and managed the Supreme Court Nomination process for Judge Merrick Garland. Earlier in his career, Deese was the point person on the actions the Obama White House took to save the U.S. auto industry.

Session 4: Nominations: Getting Your People Confirmed

Using recent Supreme Court and Cabinet nomination battles as case studies, we will explore the process of getting nominees across the finish line—including selection, vetting, rollout, stakeholder management, and Senate lobbying. Specifically, we will discuss best practices in organizing White House staff to promote and defend a nominee’s record, with a specific focus on determining and setting the narrative in the early days of a nomination.

Confirmed Guest: Stephanie Cutter, former White House Deputy Senior Advisor, Chief of Staff to First Lady Michelle Obama, and CNN host. Stephanie managed the confirmation strategy for Justice Sonia Sotomayor; we will also touch on her other work on campaigns and in the Obama and Clinton administrations.

Session 5: Translating Wonk into English

You can’t get anything done if the public doesn’t understand what you’re trying to do. This entails translating complex policy decisions into terms that can garner popular understanding and support. Our guest for this session, David Simas, ran that process for President Obama for years, playing a key role in every communications effort of the second term. We will look back at the past phases of the Affordable Care Act, which will give us a chance to explore the differences among how a White House organizes around a legislative fight, an internal management or technical challenge, and a mass mobilization priority.

Confirmed Guest: David Simas, CEO of the Obama Foundation and former White House Director of Political Strategy and Outreach. Simas previously served as Director of Opinion Research for the 2012 Obama-Biden reelection campaign.

Session 6: Bringing it All Together Part I

This session will be a wide-ranging conversation on some of the toughest challenges the previous White House faced. Police-community tensions, mass shootings, homegrown terrorism, government shutdowns, legislative cliffhangers, and everything in between. Students will get an enhanced understanding of the decision-making process during some of the most difficult moments a White House faces, when sleep is scarce and emotions are high.

Guest TBA

Session 7: Bipartisan Efforts (Working Together When You Actually Agree)

Even when leaders from both parties agree on something, it is often harder than it seems to win enough votes to secure passage through Congress. Using specific case studies from recent history, we will explore what it looks like when a White House needs to team up with the other party to get something done. We will specifically focus on Congressional outreach.

Guest TBA

Session 8: Managing Crises. Case Study: The Ebola Crisis

You can't plan for everything. Natural disasters, the rapid spread of infectious diseases, and civil unrest are possibilities every day. In this session, we will explore how a White House can organize itself to respond to these unexpected happenings. We will use the spread of Ebola in 2014-2015, and the Obama White House's response, as a case study through which students will gain insight into the personnel, policy, and communications choices that happen when a crisis hits.

Confirmed Guest: Ron Klain, former Ebola Response Coordinator under President Obama and former Chief of Staff to Vice Presidents Biden and Gore. Earlier in President Obama's time in office, Klain played a critical role in managing the implementation of the 2009 economic stimulus bill, as well as in the selection of judges and justices. Klain was played by Kevin Spacey in the HBO film "Recount," which centered on his role during the 2000 Florida recount effort.

Session 9: Bringing it All Together Part II & White House Principals Meeting Simulation

This will be a two-part session, with the first part consisting of a wide-ranging conversation that continues our look at the economic crises and opportunities a White House might face. Specifically, we will spend time on the European debt crisis and trade negotiations.

The second part of this session will be a live simulation of a White House principals meeting. Students will be assigned roles--from Secretary of Commerce to White House Communications Director--and given briefing materials ahead of time. When the meeting starts, it's up to them to convince our guest, who will chair the meeting, on the right course of action in a crisis.

Guest TBA

Note: Roles will be assigned based on attendance at previous sessions.