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David B. Cohen, *University of Akron*
Justin S. Vaughn, *Cleveland State University*
José D. Villalobos, *University of Texas at El Paso*

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What is This?

Manager-in-Chief: Applying Public Management Theory to Examine White House Chief of Staff Performance

David B. Cohen[1], Justin S. Vaughn[2], and José D. Villalobos[3]

Abstract

In an effort to examine the causal determinants of performance dynamics for the administrative presidency, the authors apply empirical public management theory to White House administration to explain managerial performance. Utilizing original survey data that measure the perceptions of former officials from the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton administrations, we conduct quantitative analyses to determine the extent to which a chief of staff's background, relationship with the president, and internal as well as external management approaches shape overall perceptions of White House administrative efforts. The authors find that managerial dimensions matter considerably when explaining the dynamics of White House organizational performance.

Two days after defeating Senator John McCain in the 2008 presidential election, President-Elect Barack Obama confirmed that he had asked Rahm Emanuel, then a ranking member of the Democratic leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives, to leave Congress and serve as his chief of staff. The political response to this decision was as diverse as the number of partisan and ideological factions that represent the American electorate and commentariat; for every fellow partisan who cheered the new president's gumption in selecting a high-energy political warrior, there was gnashing of the teeth coming from both Obama's left, which disdained the avowed "New Democrat" moderation of Emanuel's political philosophy, and the right, which was not eager to tangle with the man known as much for his cut-throat maneuvering as any other aspect of his political career. What few disputed, however, was that Obama's decision signaled his prioritization of pragmatic policy making over ideological preferences in the new administration. It also demonstrated that the president-elect wanted an individual in that position that had a deep well of Washington experience.[1] Loved or hated, Emanuel was expected to be a chief of staff who got things done effectively and, if need be, ruthlessly.[2]

Given his reputation, Emanuel's appointment conditioned observers to look for a strong performance. The White House chief of staff position, however, is challenging to analyze in terms of productivity and success. Like many other senior bureaucratic posts, a successful chief of staff is one who manages well, not necessarily one who engages in the kind of leadership that makes headlines. Indeed, after the early spate of journalistic critique over the selection of Emanuel as chief, the next major focus on him in the media would not come until many months later, when critics from the president's own side of the aisle started muttering about poor performance (e.g., Hornick 2010). This was followed by a round of high-profile defensive efforts by a number of bold-faced name journalists who succeeded not so much in claiming that Emanuel was in fact successful, but rather that he should not be blamed for the perceived failures of his boss's administration (e.g., Milbank 2010). By October 2010, even as Emanuel resigned from his position to run for mayor of Chicago, the verdict was still out on his performance as chief of staff.

In as opaque an environment as senior management can be, determining an objective standard by which to gauge a chief of staff's performance, whether as an individual or in comparison to his predecessors, is a task

[1]University of Akron, Akron, OH, USA
[2]Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA
[3]University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
José D. Villalobos, Department of Political Science, University of Texas at El Paso, Benedict Hall 111, 500 W. University Avenue, El Paso, TX 79968, USA
Email: jdvillalobos2@utep.edu

Table 1. White House Chiefs of Staff in the Modern Era, 1969–2011

Chief of staff	Tenure	President	Party
Harry Robbins Haldeman	1969–73	Richard M. Nixon	Republican
Alexander M. Haig, Jr.	1973–74	Richard M. Nixon	Republican
Donald H. Rumsfeld	1974–75	Gerald Ford	Republican
Richard M. Cheney	1975–77	Gerald Ford	Republican
William H.M. Jordan	1979–80	Jimmy Carter	Democrat
Jack H. Watson, Jr.	1980–81	Jimmy Carter	Democrat
James A. Baker III	**1981–85**	**Ronald Reagan**	**Republican**
Donald T. Regan	**1985–87**	**Ronald Reagan**	**Republican**
Howard H. Baker, Jr.	**1987–88**	**Ronald Reagan**	**Republican**
Kenneth M. Duberstein	**1988–89**	**Ronald Reagan**	**Republican**
John H. Sununu	**1989–91**	**George H. W. Bush**	**Republican**
Samuel K. Skinner	**1991–92**	**George H. W. Bush**	**Republican**
James A. Baker III[a]	1992–93	George H. W. Bush	Republican
Thomas F. McLarty III	**1993–94**	**Bill Clinton**	**Democrat**
Leon E. Panetta	**1994–97**	**Bill Clinton**	**Democrat**
Erskine B. Bowles	**1997–98**	**Bill Clinton**	**Democrat**
John D. Podesta	**1998–2001**	**Bill Clinton**	**Democrat**
Andrew H. Card, Jr.	2001–6	George W. Bush	Republican
Joshua B. Bolten	2006–9	George W. Bush	Republican
Rahm I. Emanuel[b]	2009–10	Barack Obama	Democrat
William M. Daley	2011–present	Barack Obama	Democrat

Chief of Staff Project data include personnel for those chiefs of staff shown in bold.
a. James Baker's brief second stint as chief of staff is excluded from our analyses (see note 15 for details).
b. After Emanuel left his post to run for mayor of Chicago, Peter M. Rouse stepped in briefly as "acting" chief of staff from October 1, 2010, to January 13, 2011.

bordering on Sisyphean. Although one can gauge the success of a president in numerous ways, from assessing his level of support in Congress on roll call votes to his frequency of victory on cases before the Supreme Court to the dynamics of his standing with the mass public, substantive indicators for the performance quality of a chief of staff are far more elusive. Indeed, we contend that there is no objective way to measure the performance of the White House chief of staff. Instead, observers are forced to rely on factors that are, at best, secondary impressions of a chief's quality, from media coverage to the fortunes of the president one serves, even though the former indicator can be biased or mistaken and the latter is driven by many more influences than simply how the chief of staff does his job.[3] We, however, are neither content with such analytical approaches nor dissuaded by the paucity of empirical data concerning chief of staff performance.

In this study, we seek to uncover the conditional determinants of White House chief of staff performance. To do so, we utilize empirical theory from the scholarly field of public management, adapting its central tenets to what we know about the institution and testing derived hypotheses with original survey data to determine what makes some

chiefs of staff perform better than others. We then look to explain variations of subjective managerial performance indicators with measures of other essential dimensions of public management.

The Institution of the White House Chief of Staff

As the modern presidency has become increasingly complex, the role played by the White House chief of staff has gone from one of welcome administrative support to one of leadership imperative. As evidenced by Table 1, every president since Richard Nixon has had a chief of staff at one time in his administration. In fact, since the Reagan presidency there has never been a White House absent a chief of staff. A relatively recent literature has developed examining the position in depth, though attempts to examine chief of staff performance in a systematic, empirical way have remained elusive (see D. B. Cohen 2002 for an extensive literature review). Even still, scholars have begun to attain an increasing amount of knowledge about what it is chiefs do. Some of the earliest efforts have examined the traditional roles of the chief of staff (i.e., administrator, advisor, guardian),

concluding that "chiefs of staff who are effective in their major duties will have a positive impact on the administration" (D. B. Cohen 2002, 480; also see D. B. Cohen, Dolan, and Rosati 2002; D. B. Cohen, Hult, and Walcott 2006; D. B. Cohen and Krause 2000).

Subsequent research has examined the impact that organizational schematics have on the relationship between chief of staff performance and presidential success and essentially found that the presence of the "standard model" of White House operations (see Walcott and Hult 2005) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for presidential success. In other words, chiefs generally play strong roles in hierarchical structures, but strength and hierarchy alone do not necessarily guarantee positive perceptions of performance, as was the case for chiefs such as H. R. Haldeman, Donald Regan, and John Sununu (D. B. Cohen 1997; D. B. Cohen, Hult, and Walcott 2006).

We contend that a more robust explanation for perceptions of chief of staff performance can be found by linking the aforementioned developing empirical literature with the theoretical rigor of the field of public management. In particular, we adopt the recent argument put forth by Vaughn and Villalobos (2009, 158) that to measure many of the administrative dimensions of presidential performance, one must first recognize that "beneath the symbolic trappings and enormous amounts of power inherent in the modern presidency is a conventional public bureaucracy." As such, the White House chief of staff is the individual responsible for managing the bureaucracy (and the smaller bureaucracies within) that the president commands.

This point builds on the research of Walcott and Hult (1995, 2005; also see Hult and Walcott 2004), which posits that the functioning of the White House relies on the bureaucratization of specific important tasks. As different tasks and specializations are categorized and compartmentalized into different components of the White House administrative apparatus, the extent to which a chief of staff is successful becomes dependent on his ability to leverage the strengths of the organization and external assets against internal challenges and outside forces that might stymie the president's agenda. Thus, the chief of staff's level of performance is a function of his ability to successfully harness the resources at his disposal, navigate the encroaching organizational and oppositional hurdles, and produce achievements.

Theoretical Framework: Introducing the MO Model

To examine the performance of White House bureaucracies, it is imperative to consider outputs and outcomes. After all, the way we know how organizations perform is by examining what they produce. To help with this

endeavor, we look to the field of public management, where, for several decades, scholars have concerned themselves with the forces that determine the performance of public organizations. Employing the scientific literature on managing public organizations is appropriate not only because of the link between public management and presidential organization but also because it helps fill the need for new theory-driven research on the internal politics of the executive branch. Broadly speaking, the practice of importing theory from studies of public administration to the study of the presidency is neither unique nor uncommon (see, e.g., Arnold 1998; Robinson 2004; Walcott and Hult 1987, 1995). Although some areas of research in the presidency have seen considerable theoretical development in exploring the linkages between presidents and external political forces, the literature on inner White House management and performance remains in need of "broad empirical theory that explains how the behavioral dynamics of actors within the White House shape presidential performance" (see Vaughn and Villalobos 2009, 158).

In this study, we employ the Meier–O'Toole (MO) model, which provides a platform for developing a rich theoretical explanation for why public bureaucracies such as the modern presidency perform as they do. In developing their model,[4] Meier and O'Toole distill several decades of accumulated knowledge into a testable theory that contains the most influential concepts involved in organizational performance.[5] In brief, the theory holds that organizational performance is a function of stability, internal and external management dynamics, and environmental factors. The thrust of the argument is that management matters; that is, leadership efforts made by organizational elites to maintain stability, exploit opportunities, and buffer organizational assets have an indelible impact on an organization's ability to serve its purpose. Like Meier and O'Toole, we focus our efforts on an empirical examination of the various components of this theory, which is expressed in mathematical form as follows:

$$O_t = \beta_1(S + M_1) O_{t-1} + \beta_1(X_t/S)(M_3/M_4) + \varepsilon_t$$

This model integrates several core concepts of management into an equation that predicts organizational performance (O). The first of these components is stability (S). Stability refers to those elements that minimize interruptions in bureaucratic production and promote "constancy in the design, functioning, and direction of an administrative system over time" (Meier and O'Toole 2006, 3). O'Toole and Meier (2003) identify five separate types of stability: structural, mission, production (or technology), procedural, and personnel. For this study, we focus on the latter—personnel stability as it relates to personnel

experience, staff organization, and working relationships between key figures in the administration, namely the chief of staff and the president. The manner that personnel can affect stability is twofold: "If the positions or their relationships shift over time, a system experiences instability. But even if the structural and procedural aspects remain constant and the goal of a public agency persists, changes in personnel can represent an important variety of instability" (O'Toole and Meier 2003, 46). Thus, chiefs of staff and others who hold key positions within the White House hierarchy constitute an important determining factor of stability that affects administrative performance.

Two basic categories of managerial functions compose the remainder of the model: internal and external management. Internal management (M1) concerns management's contribution to stability through alterations to organizational structure and operations. Internal management refers to managerial decisions on whether to have certain tasks performed internally (rather than using external agents) and how best to structure the distribution of task performance throughout an organization to maximize stability and performance. The second category, external management (M2), reflects an organization's level of risk aversion. While M2 is not explicitly included in the empirical model, its two components—M3 and M4—are featured independently, with M3 representing managerial efforts to exploit opportunities in the environment of an organization and M4 representing managerial efforts to buffer an organization from negative environmental influences.[6] Although recent research indicates that both of these poles of networking can independently influence organizational performance (e.g., Meier, O'Toole, and Goerdel 2006), the model is explicitly concerned with the ratio of one pole to the other. Accordingly, the ratio of M3 to M4 (i.e., M2) measures how risk averse or risk seeking a particular organization is. As such, as efforts to exploit the environment increase, so does the value of the ratio. Finally, the model also accounts for the manner in which an organization's environment (X), including contextual factors such as constraints, resources, and external demands, may shape performance.

Taken together, the components of the MO model hold that organizational performance is a function of how management balances internal dynamics with a diffuse external environment. To be clear, the MO model is not designed exclusively to explain presidency-centered phenomena; rather, it is a general theoretical expression of how key management dimensions affect the organizational performance of any type of bureaucratic entity. As noted previously, several decades of management scholarship demonstrate the independent influence of the key concepts discussed here. The strength of the MO model is that it incorporates the most important factors into a single multivariate theoretical model. Although important

and complex, the institutional presidency functions in much the same manner as the other types of bureaucracies to which the MO model has already been applied with great success.[7]

Applying the MO Model to Examine Chief of Staff Performance

For our purposes, we graft data measuring White House personnel perceptions of chief of staff management dimensions onto the MO Model. By matching the composite variables of the previously introduced model equation with valid measures of case-specific indicators, we are able to ensure a meaningful correspondence between the theoretical underpinnings of the model and the analyses reported in this study. To do so, we make use of the Chief of Staff Project (COSP) survey data (see D. B. Cohen 2002; D. B. Cohen and Krause 2000). The COSP questionnaire was mailed in two stages to individuals listed in the White House Office (special assistant level and above), select positions within the Executive Office of the President (EOP; i.e., chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Office of Management and Budget director and deputy director, and the U.S. representative to the United Nations), and cabinet and deputy cabinet officials who served in the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations. For the first stage of the project in the fall of 1998, the COSP questionnaire was sent to 393 individuals who served in the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations. For the second stage in the spring of 2005, the COSP questionnaire was sent to 383 individuals who served in the Clinton administration.[8]

The *United States Government Manual* was used as the primary source for determining COSP survey recipients.[9] Respondents were asked to complete a sixty-seven-question survey for each chief of staff with whom they worked.[10] Of the 776 individuals who were mailed surveys, 198 returned them, for an overall response rate of 25.5 percent. More specifically, former Clinton officials had a 21.4 percent response rate, while 29.5 percent of the former Reagan–Bush officials who received questionnaires returned them. Some of these individuals served more than one chief of staff and/or position, such that our sample constituted a total of 336 observations (see Table 2).[11]

Below we introduce the variables that we derive from the COSP data set to apply and measure key theoretical dimensions of the MO model, along with other important contextual controls, that influence officials' perceptions concerning overall chief of staff performance.

Outcome (O). In this project, we explore how certain variables influence perceptions of chief of staff performance

Table 2. Chief of Staff Project: Personnel by Position Level

Position level	Number of personnel
White House assistant	76
White House deputy assistant	92
White House special assistant	109
White House mixed	5
White House/cabinet mixed	1
Inner cabinet	3
Inner cabinet deputy	7
Cabinet mixed	0
Outer cabinet	12
Outer cabinet deputy	31
Total	336

outcomes. Unfortunately for scholars, much of what the chief of staff does occurs behind the scenes, visible to those in the know with an eyewitness view but less discernible to outsiders looking for tangible outputs and outcomes. Given the dearth of objective indicators, we instead analyze subjective measures of chief of staff managerial performance. Specifically, we consider chief of staff performance as perceptions of overall *effectiveness*. Effectiveness is defined as *a chief of staff who acts in the best interests of the president and helps the president to achieve his goals*. In other words, an effective chief of staff is one who will do anything that the president needs him to do. We measure overall White House staff perceptions of effectiveness using a 7-point ordinal Likert-type scale ranging from *not effective* (1) to *extremely effective* (7). All our other main variables from the COSP questionnaire are measured in similar fashion.[12]

It is important to note that by employing White House staffers' perceptions of chief of staff effectiveness we are not claiming or implying that such measures represent *actual* chief of staff effectiveness. Rather, we use White House staff perceptions as a proxy for understanding inner–White House perceptions of chief of staff performance across different chiefs of staff and administrations. The inferences drawn from our findings and conclusions are reported within such confines and should be interpreted accordingly.

Stability (S). In applying key theoretical dimensions of the MO model, the political experience of a chief of staff may be seen as a measure of stability, particularly with respect to the duties associated in dealing with other political actors interacting with the White House. For our purposes, political experience is defined as *any kind of prior experience in the political system at any level and/ or branch of government, be it campaigning or governing*. Early on, a chief of staff with a strong dose of previous political experience can provide an added measure of stability during the transition phase in helping the

president to hit the ground running with his political agenda (see Pfiffner 1996). In referencing the benefits of bureaucratic experience, O'Toole and Meier (2003, 47) point out that "multifaceted skills acquired in the trenches can make a significant difference in performance." Otherwise, a lack of political experience may result in a "learning period" at the start of a president's term wherein a less experienced chief of staff may need to test numerous approaches in bureaucratic administration before settling on a particular managerial strategy for seeking out the president's goals.[13] For personnel working in close quarters with a chief of staff who is unfamiliar with his duties, a chief's mistakes and changes in approach may lead to an unstable working environment characterized by a chief struggling to juggle the many managerial tasks at hand while trying to become familiar with the political games of the Beltway. Since other personnel depend on the chief of staff's leadership in knowing how to run the White House hierarchy, we expect that more experienced chiefs of staff are likely to engender a more stable working environment that lends itself to effective administrative performance. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *the more practical political experience a chief of staff has prior to becoming chief of staff, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived* (Hypothesis 1; H1).

Another important component of stability within the White House is the general working relationship between the chief of staff and the president. This dynamic is particularly important given the interdependence between the president and his chief of staff in managing the White House apparatus. According to D. B. Cohen and Krause (2000, 424), "[B]oth presidents and chiefs of staff, irrespective of which individuals are occupying these positions at any given point in time, invariably place limits on one another's behavior while acting for the presidency as an institution." As such, if a president and chief of staff have a good working relationship, as was the case for Howard Baker's tenure during the Reagan administration, both the chief of staff and White House hierarchical structure are likely to benefit from the unity shown between a president and chief who are both on the same page (see D. B. Cohen and Krause 2000; D. B. Cohen 2002). Otherwise, if a president and chief of staff do not have a good overall working relationship, it can create an environment of instability that disrupts the hierarchical organizational structure of the White House, trickles down to other staff, and perhaps results in poor performance outcomes.

For staff personnel working closely with the president and chief of staff, perceptions of a negative working relationship could engender low worker morale, uncertainty arising from conflicting perspectives observed between a president and his chief, and, in the most dire of cases

where a president's relationship with his chief deteriorates, a subsequent unstable transition period during which a chief of staff leaves the administration to make way for a new chief. Given the interdependence of these two positions and their potential for affecting the stability of the White House organizational environment, it makes intuitive sense that the general working relationship between a president and chief of staff affects how others view the chief of staff's overall effectiveness in working for the president, as well as in serving the broader institutional presidency. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *the better the general working relationship between a chief of staff and a president, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived* (Hypothesis 2; H2).

Internal management (M1). Although presidents mediate between the internal and external environments of the White House bureaucracy, chiefs of staff are primarily responsible for managing the internal workings of the White House bureaucracy and helping the president to plan out and make key policy decisions. For the purposes of this study, internal management refers to the manner in which a chief of staff interacts directly with the president in both helping to manage the operations of the White House and advising the president on his policy agenda, primarily as it relates to the chief of staff's duties within the White House in working with other administrative staff. Accordingly, we consider how a chief of staff's role in internally managing the White House and advising the president may affect one's overall perceptions of that chief's effectiveness.

Chiefs of staff have a basic responsibility to coordinate the administrative process for ensuring the overall internal functioning of the White House (see Buchanan 1990; D. B. Cohen 1997, 2002; Kernell and Popkin 1986; Pfiffner 1993; Walcott, Warshaw, and Wayne 2001). It is their task to oversee the policy process, take care that the president is not overly inundated with memos and other paperwork, maintain the president's schedule, and see to it that the president is properly informed by and able to communicate to his staff at all times while also helping to relay messages to the inner staff as well as to line agencies amid the outer bureaucracy (see Kernell and Popkin 1986, 205). In other words, the chief of staff is expected to ensure that the White House functions in an efficient manner (D. B. Cohen 2002).

A chief of staff who fails in his administrative duties fails not only the president but the institution as a whole. If he is not up to his administrative role, as was the case with Samuel Skinner in the George H. W. Bush White House and Thomas McLarty in the Clinton administration (D. B. Cohen 2002; D. B. Cohen, Hult, and Walcott 2006), the White House will cease to function properly. When this happens, the media often look to the chief of staff as a relevant focus of scrutiny and may, at least in part, fault the chief of staff for an administration's poor performance. On the other hand, a chief of staff who embraces his administrative duties (e.g., Leon Panetta or James Baker) usually oversees a well-running White House. For personnel staff, those who perceive the chief of staff as successfully embracing his role to coordinate the White House administrative process (e.g., overseeing the president's schedule and ensuring the smooth operation of the White House) may be more likely to view the chief's overall performance in a positive light. Thus, we hypothesize that *the more a chief of staff tends toward coordinating as an administrator, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived* (Hypothesis 3; H3).

Another crucial hat the chief of staff wears is that of advisor, a role that heavily influences the internal workings of the White House for managing the executive branch and making decisions relating to the president's public policy agenda. Indeed, the chief of staff is in the president's company more than anyone else and is often called on to discuss policy options and politics with the president. Other staff members rarely see the president without the chief of staff being present. Thus, the chief of staff, because of his position in the White House as *primus inter pares*, has ample opportunity and potential, if the chief of staff and president desire it, to be the most important presidential advisor (D. B. Cohen 2002).

Chiefs must attempt to be honest brokers when assuming the advisor role (Kernell and Popkin 1986). Chiefs who abuse their advisor position by consistently shutting out opposing views to the president tread a dangerous course and will find few friends to come to their defense when they inevitably stumble in their duties, as was the case for Donald Regan during the Reagan administration (D. B. Cohen 2002). They may also discover the wrath of many whom they have crossed within the administration and Congress who subsequently attempt to undermine their authority and credibility in the White House (see, e.g., D. B. Cohen 1997; Solomon 1991). Thus, the manner in which personnel staff views the chief of staff with respect to the advisor role may significantly influence how they rate a chief's overall performance. Given these considerations, we hypothesize that *the more well-regarded a chief of staff is as an advisor (with respect to embracing that role), the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived* (Hypothesis 4; H4).

External management (M3/M4). External management in the MO model denotes a ratio measure between the amounts of networking (M3) and buffering (M4) that occur within an organization (O'Toole and Meier 1999, 2003). As the gatekeeper to the president, chiefs of staff stand to alter perceptions of effectiveness depending on whether they allow individuals adequate access to themselves as well as to the president. The COSP survey employs key questions concerning perceptions regarding chief of staff *accessibility*, which may serve as a measure

of networking, as well as perceptions concerning chief of staff *guardianship* (in terms of acting as a proxy for the president), which we denote as a measure of buffering.

For networking, we expect that increased levels of chief of staff accessibility should increase perceptions of chief of staff effectiveness for chiefs who make themselves available for what White House staff personnel would invariably consider important interactions that lead to better administrative performance. Indeed, chiefs such as James Baker and Howard Baker earned a reputation for being very accessible and accommodating of staff personnel, including those with dissenting views (D. B. Cohen 2002, 475; also see Eisenhower 1987). The largely collegial approach adopted by these two chiefs has often been described as pragmatic and useful for the decision-making process within the White House. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *the more accessible a chief of staff is, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived* (Hypothesis 5; H5).

With respect to the role buffering plays, the level at which a chief of staff acts as a guardian may significantly affect the extent to which the executive branch staff interacts with the president (D. B. Cohen 2002). Whereas a variety of staffers perform the tasks of administration and advising, it is the province of the chief of staff to act as guardian, or protector of the president, even at the chief's own expense. Indeed, presidents often depend on their chiefs to take care of some of the most distasteful tasks in the White House, such as firing administration personnel, gatekeeping the Oval Office to protect the president's schedule and workload, and acting as a lightning rod for criticism of the administration. As such, a very protective chief of staff stands to serve as a buffer against outside influences that could alter the president's decision-making process and lengthen the chain of command.

The implications of the guardian role are that the chief of staff incurs the wrath of a multitude of actors within the Beltway. It is a thankless role at times, but crucial to the success of any president. Other staff members may occasionally act as guardian; however, it is the chief of staff who is expected to assume this role on a consistent basis. Although personnel staff may at times feel frustrated when denied a certain amount of access, we expect that a chief of staff who embraces the guardian role as a means to protect the president's best interests will be perceived overall as an effective servant of the White House. Otherwise, a chief of staff who fails in this important task ultimately does a disservice to the president and may undermine the effectiveness of the White House organizational apparatus. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *the more a chief of staff acts as a guardian or proxy for the president, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived* (Hypothesis 6; H6).

Contextual factors (X). In addition to the questionnaire measures, we also include measures of some key contextual factors. To begin with, because our survey data consider the perceptions of individuals listed across positions in the White House Office, the EOP, and cabinet and deputy cabinet officials, we expect that the level at which one serves may affect the manner in which one perceives chief of staff performance. Specifically, those who are in closer proximity to the chief of staff are more likely to have a "team mentality" and not feel as stymied or put off as would other personnel, such as cabinet-level officials. Chiefs of staff are also more likely to (and more able to) surround themselves with supporters in their inner circle than outside of it. Moreover, those in closer proximity to the chief of staff are more likely to observe firsthand the chief of staff's efforts to serve the administration. Accordingly, those who can witness more concrete actions related to performance may be more likely to perceive the chief of staff as an effective force within the White House. We consider the various position levels for the individuals surveyed and construct an ordinal control variable that measures the proximity to the COS, where 1 denotes a cabinet-level position, 2 denotes a mixed position, and 3 denotes a White House–level position. As such, we expect that the closer one is in proximity to the chief of staff, the more likely one will view the chief of staff as effective.

In trying to aid the president in moving his agenda forward, a chief of staff must also contend with the makeup of Congress. As such, chiefs of staff serving at a time of divided government may find their jobs more difficult than those serving a president with majority support in the legislative branch. Accordingly, the additional challenges faced by a presidential administration under divided government may negatively affect perceptions of chief of staff performance, as they do perceptions of presidential performance. We measure divided government as a dichotomous variable where 1 denotes a time period when divided government was present for the majority of a chief of staff's tenure and 0 otherwise.

If a chief of staff is serving at a time of a foreign policy crisis, such an event is likely to have a significant influence on the manner in which one perceives a president and his administration. Depending on the nature of the crisis (e.g., being bogged down in a quagmire like Vietnam versus a rally-round-the-flag effect followed by a successful military intervention; see Mueller 1973), executive branch staff may alter their perceptions of the chief of staff's ability to serve the president effectively. Generally speaking, we expect that, as with the president, White House personnel are likely to rally around a chief in a time of crisis as a show of in-group unity. Accordingly, we expect that a state of foreign crisis during a chief of staff's tenure is likely to have an overall positive effect on

Table 3. Measures of Chief of Staff (COS) Effectiveness in the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton Administrations (ordered logit regression with robust standard errors clustered by COS)

Independent variables	Coeff.	Z score	Min->Max	±SD/2
Stability (S)				
COS experience	0.365** (0.13)	2.80	.1386	.0476
COS working relationship w/POTUS	1.049*** (0.255)	4.11	.2469	.0764
Internal management (M1)				
COS administrator role	0.204** (0.08)	2.57	.0714	.0179
COS advisor role	0.345** (0.14)	2.47	.1323	.0358
External management (M2)				
COS accessibility (M3)	0.161** (0.065)	2.48	.0676	.0190
COS guardianship (M4)	0.184** (0.074)	2.49	.0770	.0189
Environmental controls (X)				
Proximity to the COS	0.162* (0.122)	1.33	.0230	.0081
Divided government (1,0)	−0.393 (0.429)	−0.92	—	NA[a]
Crisis (1,0)	−2.521*** (0.28)	−9.00	.1533	NA[a]
Presidential approval	0.291 (0.287)	1.01	—	—
N	303			
Pseudo R^2	.3005			

Dependent variable: 7-point ordinal scale from *not effective* (1) to *extremely effective* (7). Standard errors in parentheses.
a. Predicted probability scores for a half standard deviation above and below the mean are not applicable for these dichotomous variables.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

perceptions of chief of staff performance, as they would for overall perceptions of presidential performance. We measure the crisis variable as 1 for chiefs of staff who experience at least one major foreign policy crisis during their tenure and 0 otherwise.

Last, the manner in which one views the president's overall job performance is also likely to affect one's perceptions concerning chief of staff performance. Accordingly, we expect that generally favorable presidential approval ratings will have an overall positive effect on perceptions of chief of staff effectiveness (see, e.g., Edwards 1990; Brace and Hinckley 1992, 1993). We measure presidential approval as the overall average percentage change for the duration of a given chief of staff's tenure in serving a president.[14]

Empirical Findings and Discussion

Our analysis examines the tenures of ten White House chiefs of staff across three administrations from 1981 to 2001.[15] As our method of analysis, we employ ordered logit regression with robust standard errors clustered by chief of staff. We do so in accordance with the operationalization of our dependent variable, which, as previously mentioned, constitutes an ordinal survey response measure. Our unit of analysis is the response of a given former White House staff member.

Our empirical findings indicate that perceptions of former White House officials concerning their respective

chiefs of staffs' backgrounds, relationships with the president, and internal and external management styles, along with key contextual factors, are, in accordance with our main hypotheses, significantly correlated with overall perceptions of chief of staff effectiveness (see Tables 3 and 4).[16] The predicted probability scores for most of our key variables suggest moderate to substantial levels of influence on overall chief of staff performance perceptions. Taken together, our results provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that help explain chief of staff performance.

Explaining Chief of Staff Effectiveness

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the results indicate that perceptions concerning a chief of staff's experience and working relationship with the president each have a positive and significant influence on perceptions of overall chief of staff effectiveness ($p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively), thus serving as important components of managerial stability (S). Regarding the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values), the results suggest that chiefs of staff who are highly politically experienced are about 13.86 percent more likely to be perceived as effective than those known to have little to no political experience, which corroborates our first hypothesis (H1). As such, inexperienced chiefs of staff who enter the position with a limited

Table 4. Hypotheses for Explaining Chief of Staff (COS) Effectiveness (with *p* values)

Hypothesis	*p* value
Stability (COS experience)	
H1 The more practical political experience a chief of staff has prior to becoming chief of staff, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived.	$p < .05$
Stability (COS working relationship w/POTUS)	
H2 The better the general working relationship between a chief of staff and a president, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived.	$p < .001$
Internal management (COS administrator role)	
H3 The more a chief of staff tends toward coordinating as an administrator, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived.	$p < .05$
Internal management (COS advisor role)	
H4 The more well regarded a chief of staff is as an advisor (with respect to embracing that role), the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived.	$p < .05$
External management (COS accessibility)	
H5 The more accessible a chief of staff is, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived.	$p < .05$
External management (COS guardianship)	
H6 The more a chief of staff acts as a guardian or proxy for the president, the more effective the chief of staff is likely to be perceived.	$p < .05$

background may face more scrutiny and pressure in trying to help a president run an administration (especially during the initial transition period) than those with a more established political record. Presumably, personnel staff may keep a running tally of a chief's successes and failures over the course of his tenure, eventually forming their overall impressions concerning a chief of staff's performance. Given our findings, it seems that less experienced chiefs are at a disadvantage in being able to meet expectations tied to overall chief of staff effectiveness.

With regard to a chief of staff's working relationship with the president, the results similarly fall in line with the expectations we laid out for our second hypothesis (H2). Specifically, the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values) indicate that chiefs of staff who are deemed to have an excellent relationship with the president are 24.69 percent more likely to be perceived as effective performers than chiefs deemed to have a poor relationship with their commander in chief. In other words, a chief who visibly gets along with a president is much more likely to be viewed as effectively serving that president than one who appears to have a less cordial acquaintance with his boss. Additional exploration of this type of appraisal—particularly in the manner that such perceptions may affect organizational worker morale and productivity—may help further uncover the dynamics that affect overall White House administrative performance, and not just from one administration to the next but also across different chiefs of staff.

Concerning internal management factors (M1), we find that chiefs of staff who meet personnel expectations concerning their administrative and advisor roles are more likely to be perceived as effective in their performance. Specifically, when a chief of staff tends toward coordination in his role as administrator, it has a positive effect on overall perceptions of effectiveness ($p < .05$), which supports our third hypothesis (H3). Regarding the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values), the results demonstrate that a chief seen as "very much a coordinator" (e.g., overseeing the president's schedule and ensuring the smooth operation of the White House) is about 7.14 percent more likely to be perceived as effective as compared to one who is not. With respect to a chief of staff's advisory role, the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values) indicate that chiefs of staff who are perceived to have strongly embraced their role in serving the president as an advisor are about 13.23 percent more likely to be perceived as effective as chiefs than those who are not ($p < .05$), thus corroborating our fourth hypothesis (H4). For each of these internal management indicators, it makes intuitive sense that chiefs of staff who embrace these key roles are perceived more positively than those who stray from standard expectations.

When it comes to external managerial networking (M2), we find that chiefs of staff who make themselves more readily accessible to White House officials are seen as more effective in their overall performance than those who do not ($p < .05$). In line with our fifth hypothesis

(H5), the results for the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values) suggest that chiefs viewed as "extremely accessible" are about 6.76 percent more likely to be perceived as effective in their performance than those viewed as "not accessible." At the same time, we find that chiefs of staff who serve as a proxy (i.e., guardian) for the president in performing certain undesirable tasks—including fighting political battles on the president's behalf and shifting blame and criticism away from the president—are also more likely to score higher with regard to overall perceptions of their effectiveness ($p < .05$). Specifically, the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values) indicate that chiefs perceived to serve aptly in their guardian role are about 7.7 percent more likely to be viewed as effective as those who are not, which corroborates our final hypothesis (H6). Thus, while some forms of guardianship may be viewed in a negative light (especially at the individual level when one is restricted access), chiefs of staff who find a strong balance between being accessible and serving as a guardian or "protector" of the president are more often judged as effective administrators.

Outside of the managerial tasks of the chief of staff, certain contextual factors (X) also affect an administration's ability to meet its political goals and, in turn, influence overall personnel perceptions concerning a chief of staff's ability to effectively aid the president with his agenda. For instance, we find that the presence of one or more major crises during a chief of staff's tenure may have a negative impact on one's perceived capacity for serving the president effectively ($p < .001$). Initially, we had expected that, as with the president, White House personnel staff would tend to rally around a chief in a time of crisis. However, the results suggest that during a tenuous crisis situation, the chief of staff may instead have to bear the brunt of any criticism that may be dealt within the inner circle of the White House, thereby more often hurting rather than aiding overall appraisals of one's performance. In particular, the results for the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values) suggest that the presence of a crisis makes it about 15.33 percent less likely that a chief of staff will be perceived as effective in his position.

Last, we find a moderately significant and positive link between the proximity of White House personnel to the chief of staff and overall perceptions of chief of staff effectiveness ($p < .1$). Specifically, the results for the changes in predicted probabilities (varying from minimum to maximum values) indicate that inner White House personnel have a marginally greater likelihood (2.3 percent) of rating the chief as highly effective as compared to those who serve in outer cabinet positions. Thus, as we previously surmised, it appears that White House personnel who can witness more concrete actions related to performance appear more likely (if only slightly) to perceive the chief of staff as an effective force within the White House.

Conclusion

In this study, we have applied empirical public management theory to the study of the administrative presidency. The results of our efforts to apply COSP data to Vaughn and Villalobos's (2009) adapted theoretical framework for studying the managerial presidency indicate that the MO model maintains robust explanatory power when evaluating the causal determinants of White House organizational performance. Focusing on factors that shape a chief of staff's perceived effectiveness, the central tenets of the management model exhibit significant relationships with chief of staff performance. The chief of staff does not serve the president in a vacuum, however, and external events also condition the personnel perceptions of a chief's overall effectiveness in serving the president.

To strengthen our understanding of chief of staff leadership and performance, this area of research should be further extended. Future efforts should consider whether the general relationships identified here persist or change in important ways with respect to more recent and upcoming administrations. Most pertinent would be circulating the COSP questionnaire to relevant White House personnel from the George W. Bush administration as well as for those who recently served during Rahm Emanuel's tenure as chief under the Obama administration. In doing so, scholars should further explore (1) the conceptualization and measurement of chief of staff effectiveness and (2) other measures of chief of staff performance such as chief of staff influence and how it fares in relation to the concept of effectiveness. Generally speaking, one can distinguish between effectiveness and influence by considering the end result of each concept. As we have argued in this study, an effective chief of staff, by definition, will be a net positive to a president and his administration. However, an influential chief of staff can be either a net positive or a net negative for an administration depending on the manner in which a chief's influence (i.e., power to affect change or outcomes) is wielded.[17] In some cases, a number of the most influential chiefs, such as Donald Regan, have caused great damage to the presidents they have served by exerting influence to benefit their own agenda, while others may have aided their commander in chief by directing him in a positive direction meant to lift a president's image and improve performance. As such, one might argue that all effective chiefs of staff, because of the credibility and respect they have earned in serving the White House, are influential; however, not all influential chiefs of staff are necessarily effective. Teasing out

these differences, however, is a tall order, particularly given the potential overlap in interpretation between the two terms that may occur in seeking out subjective evaluations from former personnel staff.[18]

In future efforts, a comparison between the COSP survey performance indicators and other expert-based opinions should also be undertaken to (1) further explore the validity of the study's main variable measures and how to improve them for future survey waves and (2) derive additional measures and robustness checks of other factors such as chief of staff influence, ability, and skill. Previous studies such as Clinton and Lewis's (2008) work, which combines expert-based subjective ratings derived from scholarly and journalistic expertise with objective measures of agency characteristics for obtaining agency preference estimates, provide a strong template for developing such an approach. Given the dearth of objective assessments of White House chiefs of staff, developing other reliable and varied subjective measures of White House (and other governmental and bureaucratic entity) performance outputs and outcomes thus remains a viable and worthwhile endeavor.

It would also be useful to uncover attitudes concerning executive branch performance apart from the president's immediate inner circle by expanding survey coverage to other important members of the broader White House hierarchy. Indeed, outside of the vast scholarly explorations and appraisals of presidential and, to a more limited extent, chief of staff performance, knowledge about other White House personnel behavior and performance remains sparse. Although scholars have made clear the difference between the president as an individual and the presidency as an institution, most work continues to rely largely on knowledge of presidential behavior and performance, often treating much of the remainder of the institution purely as an extension of the president's actions and preferences. Given the importance of this institution and its impact on the political landscape, scholars should persist in their efforts to further explore the dynamics of executive administrative performance.

By continuing to examine the ways in which bureaucracy functions within the most powerful and symbolically important American political institution, scholars can discover more not just about the presidency but also about the more general linkages between politics and bureaucracy, public administration, managerial leadership, and political success. For example, one could further analyze legislative–executive relations and performance by extending beyond general public approval measures of presidential and congressional figures to study the broader relationship between the executive and legislative branches, particularly as it pertains to subjective appraisals of those who manage the many bureaucratic entities run by a myriad of governmental officials and

staff personnel working within the Beltway. Indeed, relatively little is known about how staff personnel and other Washingtonian insiders and subordinates view their superiors and institutional environments or how such perceptions may condition the key organizational dynamics that further shape overall administrative and policy performance.

Beyond the social scientific allure of applying empirical public management theory to the study of the administrative presidency, this study has normative merit as well. Policy makers, practitioners, and White House personnel have access to relevant social science research, and this project provides insightful information concerning the traits, characteristics, and management practices that shape White House policy and political processes. Indeed, outside of responding to the usual speculation circulated publicly by the media and more privately among key insiders, presidential administrations may benefit from conducting internal studies modeled after the COSP questionnaire as a means of improving overall administrative performance outputs and outcomes.

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Notes

1. Prior to his experience as a lawmaker in the U.S. House of Representatives (2003–9), Emanuel spent numerous years as a senior advisor for the Clinton administration (1993–98), thereby bringing experience from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue to the job.
2. In fact, in a November 22, 2008, *National Journal* Congressional Insiders Poll, 94 percent of Democrats and

93 percent of Republicans believed that Emanuel would "be an effective White House chief of staff" (R. E. Cohen and Bell 2008).

3. Of course, that is not to say that the chief of staff does not exert notable influence over the fortunes of the chief executive (see D. B. Cohen 2002, 464-65).

4. Included in this literature, for example, are works by Barnard (1948), Bozeman (1993), Gulick (1937), Hargrove and Glidewell (1990), Hersey and Blanchard (1982), Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill (2001), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), Selznick (1957), Simon (1947), and Taylor (1985).

5. For examples of theory-oriented research pertaining to the Meier–O'Toole model, see Meier and O'Toole (2004) and O'Toole and Meier (1999).

6. Acts of exploiting opportunities may include managers publicly advocating their case, clamoring for more funds, and attempting to take on more responsibility. Buffering, on the other hand, refers to managerial efforts to avoid interactions that leave their organizations vulnerable to external influence.

7. For example, the MO model has generated testable hypotheses concerning the determinants of organizational performance for bureaucracies as disparate as Texas school districts (Meier and O'Toole 2001, 2002, 2003), law enforcement agencies (Nicholson-Crotty and O'Toole 2004), and a wide assortment of municipal government services in the United Kingdom (Andrews et al. 2005). Here, we intend our foray into executive government to serve as yet another example of the MO model's wide applicability for examining organizational management and performance.

8. The questionnaire pool (totaling 776 recipients over the two stages) excluded several individuals who were deceased at the time of the mailing and those whose addresses could not be located after an exhaustive Internet and public records search.

9. The *United States Government Manual* is published annually and, among other items, contains a listing of all upper level employees in the White House and executive departments.

10. The most represented groups in the sample were the ones that contained the largest number of targeted former officials (i.e., White House assistant, deputy assistant, and special assistant personnel), while those represented in smaller numbers reflected positions with a much smaller target population (i.e., cabinet and deputy cabinet personnel). As such, there is no reason to assume that the sample collected is biased or not representative of the target population.

11. Within our sample, there was only one person for the White House/cabinet mixed position, thereby resulting in a lack of variation in survey responses at this level. As such, we excluded this position from the data analyses to avoid drawing any unreliable or invalid inferences from our findings. In addition, there were also a number of missing responses for some of the survey questions, resulting in an *N* of 303 for our main analysis.

12. See the supplemental appendix (at http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/) for the full details concerning the specific wording of questions and scale measures relating to each of our main variables as they originally appeared in the Chief of Staff Project survey questionnaire.

13. To illustrate this point, D. B. Cohen (2002, 481) refers to Andrew Card's experience prior to joining the G. W. Bush administration, citing Card's credentials as "a veteran of the Reagan administration and a former deputy COS and secretary of transportation in the G. H. W. Bush administration" and how they provided Card with the "necessary experience, knowledge, and organizational skill to produce a smooth-running White House free of the early blunders so characteristic of many new administrations" (also see Hall and Keen 2001).

14. Since the survey questions measure perceptions of a chief of staff's overall performance for the total time serving a given president, we operationalize our presidential approval measure to reflect aggregate measures of average change. Unfortunately, we are therefore not at liberty to disaggregate our presidential approval measures to reflect monthly (or even yearly) changes. Nevertheless, the multiple numbers of respondents for each of the chiefs we analyze (e.g., thirty-nine for James Baker) allow us to conduct strong, cross-sectional analyses across multiple administrations and varying environmental conditions.

15. Within this time period, James Baker's short second stint as chief of staff was excluded from the survey conducted for these analyses. Instead, officials from the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations were asked to focus on and consider Baker solely with regard to his first full stint under Reagan. Despite this omission, since we conduct cross-sectional (rather than time-series) analyses, the absence of Baker's second stint has no bearing on evaluations of his predecessor (Skinner) or successor (McLarty).

16. Also see Tables A–I in the supplemental appendix (at http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/), which provide additional information concerning the pairwise correlations, descriptive statistics, and frequency distributions for all of our main variables.

17. See, for example, Smith's (1988, xxiii) and Light's (1984, 18) conceptualizations of power.

18. In an earlier version of this study, we also employed a variable for chief of staff influence as an alternative measure of performance (for more details on the relevant additional analyses and their limitations, refer to the supplemental appendix at http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/).

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