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# The Managing of the Presidency

## Applying Theory-Driven Empirical Models to the Study of White House Bureaucratic Performance

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We argue that scholars of the presidency should begin to apply their rich descriptive understanding of White House organization and personnel to questions of causality. To help guide this effort, we offer a theory-driven empirical model that explains organizational performance. Importing theory from the public management literature, we show how scholars can use the Meier-O'Toole (MO) model to explain performance outcomes and dynamics for key political and policy functions within the institutional presidency. We introduce the MO model and discuss its potential impact on the field of presidency studies.

**Keywords:** *presidency; public management; bureaucratic performance*

For longer than necessary, the scientific study of the presidency has labored under the reputation of being theoretically underdeveloped. Since at least 1977, when Hugh Heclo reported to the Ford Foundation on the dismal state of presidency research, scholars have been wringing their hands over this problem (Edwards and Wayne 1983; see also Edwards, Kessel, and Rockman 1993). Although some aspects of presidency studies have since seen considerable theoretical development, particularly research that examines linkages between presidents and external political arenas, the literature examining phenomena that occurs *within* the White House merits renewed attempts to develop empirical theory.<sup>1</sup>

To answer this call for new theory-driven research on the internal politics of the executive branch, scholars need broad empirical theory that explains how the behavioral dynamics of actors within the White House shape presidential performance.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we introduce such a theoretical model: the Meier-O'Toole (MO) model. Imported from the field of public management, the MO model provides a rich theoretical explanation for why the modern presidency performs as it does. Our reference to the scientific literature on managing public organizations is appropriate because beneath the symbolic trappings and enormous amounts of power inherent in the modern presidency is a conventional public bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the American presidency is a bureaucracy

that itself is composed of a series of smaller bureaucracies, the success of which depends on how well these organizations, and the institution as a whole, are managed.

This last point builds on the research of Walcott and Hult (1995, 2005; Hult and Walcott 2004), who show that the functioning of the White House relies on the bureaucratization of specific important tasks.<sup>4</sup> Just as the president's administrative role centers on his ability to manage the numerous bureaucracies that compose the federal government, the skill with which the president does so depends on how well the internal bureaucracies of the White House are managed. Walcott and Hult provide scholars with an important base from which to develop empirical theory that explains presidential performance. Presidency scholars can extend Walcott and Hult's work by using the theoretical expectations derived from the MO model to examine how the functioning of these bureaucracies influences presidential performance.

In this article, we introduce the components of the MO model and discuss how this theoretical model

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can aid presidency scholars. We begin by conceptualizing presidential performance.

## Conceptualizing Performance

As Walcott and Hult demonstrate that presidents bureaucratize important tasks in order to lead, we suggest that *how* these bureaucracies are organized and function determines the extent to which presidents are able to lead. That is, the very nature of the bureaucracy that serves the president shapes both the policy-making power of the presidency (Nathan 1983; Waterman 1989; see also Flanagan 2001) and the political performance of the president (Walcott and Hult 1987).

But what exactly is performance? Performance refers to every purposeful action the president takes. It is important to note that we conceptualize performance objectively, not normatively. That is, we are not attempting to judge whether a White House bureaucracy does a good or bad job at, for example, writing a speech, as would be the case with the Office of Speechwriting, or reviewing proposed agency rule changes, as would be the case with the Office of Management and Budget. Rather, we seek to understand what factors influence an organization's propensity to produce outputs as stipulated by their mission. Accordingly, we define performance as the output of the many internal White House bureaucracies that have been charged with executing certain tasks and functions. This definition is admittedly vague, insofar as it is not agency-specific; however, the ambiguity is not because of a lack of conceptual clarity but rather because performance is such a diverse phenomenon. Because different White House bureaucracies charged with different missions produce different outputs, we must leave the definition of performance flexible to that end.

The MO model, which we introduce in the next section, presents a broad approach to explaining organizational performance. The abstract quality of the model allows scholars to apply it to many different organizations, operationalizing performance as appropriate based on the function of the bureaucratic organization under examination and the nature of the scholar's research question. 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).

## Introducing the Management Model

To examine the performance of White House bureaucracies, our focus must necessarily 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, in which, for several decades, scholars have concerned themselves with the forces that determine the performance of public organizations.<sup>5</sup> In a recent and ongoing research program, Kenneth J. Meier and Laurence J. O'Toole Jr. distill this accumulated knowledge into a testable theory that contains the most influential concepts involved in organizational performance.<sup>6</sup> Meier and O'Toole focus their efforts on an empirical examination of the various components of this theory, which is expressed in mathematical form as follows:

$$O_t = \beta_1(S + M_1) O_{t-1} + \beta_2(X_t/S)(M_3/M_4) + \epsilon_t \quad (1)^7$$

This model integrates several core concepts of management into an equation that predicts organizational performance ( $O$ ).<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup>

Two basic categories of managerial functions compose the remainder of the model: internal and external management. Internal management ( $M_1$ ) 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 use external agents) and how best to structure the distribution of task performance throughout the organization to maximize stability and performance. The second category, external management ( $M_2$ ), reflects an organization's level of risk aversion.<sup>10</sup> External management has two modes,  $M_3$  and  $M_4$ , where  $M_3$  represents managerial efforts to exploit opportunities in the environment of an organization and  $M_4$  represents managerial efforts to buffer an organization from negative environmental influences.<sup>11</sup> Although recent research indicates that both of these poles of networking can independently influence organizational performance (Meier,

O'Toole, and Goerdel 2006), the model is explicitly concerned with the ratio of one pole to the other.<sup>12</sup> Finally, an organization's environment ( $X$ )—including factors such as constraints, resources, and external demands—also shapes 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. Specifically, how management structures and staffs an organization ( $M_1$ ), how management interacts with external actors ( $M_2$ ), whether it does so in an exploitative ( $M_3$ ) or buffered ( $M_4$ ) manner, and how management uses resources to satisfy external pressures within environmental constraints ( $X$ ) determine the productivity of a bureaucratic entity. Several decades of management scholarship demonstrate the independent influence of several of the concepts discussed here. The strength of the MO model is that it incorporates the most important factors into a single multivariate theoretical argument. Although important and complex, the institutional presidency functions in the same manner as the other types of bureaucracies to which the MO model has already been applied with great success.

### **Applying the MO Model to Presidential Studies**

We suggest there are two approaches scholars may follow when applying the MO model to studies of the institutional presidency. First, scholars can examine specific organizations within the White House and how they perform. Second, scholars can examine specific personnel positions and see how they fit within the broader institutional structure. That is, students of the presidency can examine how an organization is managed as well as the manner in which managers lead their organization. Both approaches take us to the same destination (i.e., theory-driven analyses of causal influences on organization and management in the White House) but do so along different paths.

### **Examining the Organization**

Applying the MO model to a particular bureaucracy within the White House comports well with a tradition within the field of presidency studies. Numerous existing studies focus on specific political, administrative, and decision-making institutions within the White House. For example, Maltese (1994)

traces the evolution and activity of the White House Office of Communications from its origins in the Nixon administration through the Reagan years. Collier (1997) provides a similar analysis of the Office of Legislative Affairs from Eisenhower through Clinton. Other related scholarship examines the Office of Management and Administration (Arnold, Walcott, and Patterson 2001), the Office of the Staff Secretary (Hult and Tenpas 2001), the Office of Communications (Kumar 2001, 2003), the Office of Management and Budget (Campbell 1986; Heclo 1999), the Office of Presidential Personnel (Patterson and Pfiffner 2001), the Office of Advance (Burton 2006), and the White House Counsel's Office (Borrelli, Hult, and Kassop 2001), among many others (see also Kumar and Sullivan 2003).

This literature provides rich detail about these organizations, informing us that the way these organizations are structured matters. Furthermore, logic dictates that White House bureaucracies exist to perform, not simply to exist. If how an organization is structured partially determines what it is able to produce, then as organizations change, we should expect organizational output to respond. Combining the theoretical power of the MO model with this body of literature, we can increase our understanding of how these organizations perform.

Although it may seem difficult to imagine what organizations within the presidency produce, we have faith that experts on specific White House bureaucracies can cleverly distinguish appropriately operationalized dependent variables. By carefully thinking through what these organizations produce and applying our existing knowledge of structural change over time and across administrations, presidency scholars can translate our rich descriptive understanding into a solid basis for causal inference and theory-driven analysis.<sup>13</sup> For example, from the expansive literature on bureaucracies such as the Office of Speechwriting or the Office of Communications, we can distill how their organizational structure has changed; by using a variety of presidential rhetoric measures, scholars can examine the influence these changes have on organizational output.<sup>14</sup>

### **Examining the Manager**

Similar to the literature concerning White House organizations, a body of research examines specific personnel positions within the White House apparatus.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this research indicates how specific positions influence presidential performance.<sup>16</sup> By

applying causal expectations drawn from the MO model to link the behaviors of key members of an administration with subsequent political or policy outcomes, presidency scholars can tap the stored potential of the current body of knowledge. Additionally, by using data gleaned from elite surveys or archival resources, scholars can systematically examine the relationship between the networking activity of White House bureaucrats and their level of production, making appropriate causal inferences based on the key components of the MO model. For instance, scholars could examine the linkage between a press secretary's interaction with the press and positive coverage of the president and his policies. More specifically, scholars can use archival data to cull empirical evidence of internal networking. For example, Vaughn and Villalobos (2006) design a data-gathering method that quantifies the level of interaction between presidential policy advisors and speechwriters. They use measures of the frequency and nature of advisor-speechwriter networking to explain the ultimate content of presidential rhetoric. By adding additional cases over time and across administrations, particularly those featuring varying staff structures, scholars can determine how organizational structure and networking influence the president's public appeals.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

We urge scholars of the presidency to apply our rich descriptive understanding of White House organization and personnel toward questions of causality. Meier and O'Toole's theory-driven empirical model of managerial impact on organizational performance provides a helpful starting point from which presidency scholars can begin to structure meaningful causal-oriented inquiry concerning the organizational presidency. By combining our existing knowledge of how presidents organize bureaucracies within the White House with clever social scientific research designs that use the MO model, we can fundamentally overhaul our approach to the study of the organizational presidency.

## Notes

1. Much of the current literature on the internal workings of the presidency is largely descriptive. Such literature includes, for example, research on communications (Kumar 2001, 2003; Maltese 1994), public opinion (Heith 1998), speechwriting, legislative liaison, and public liaison functions (Hult and Walcott 1998, 2002; Walcott and Hult 1999; see also Collier 1997, Davis 1979, and Holtzman 1970).

2. There are several examples from the existing research on internal White House politics that use empirical theory; however,

these theoretical arguments are specialized and attend to specific political phenomena such as staffing (George 1980; Johnson 1974; Lewis 2005; Ponder 2000; Rudalevige 2002), decision making (Dickinson 2005), and domestic policy making (Krause 2004; Light 2000).

3. The practice of importing theory from studies of public administration to the study of the presidency is not unique, nor is it uncommon. Recently, for example, Robinson (2004) contrasted two theories widely used in public administration research—administrative orthodoxy and realpolitik—to explain presidential attention to administrative reform (see also Arnold 1998; March and Olsen 1983; Seidman 1998). Additionally, Walcott and Hult (1987, 1995) use a variant of the organizational theory of governance to explain White House staff structure and dynamics.

4. Walcott and Hult demonstrate that presidents bureaucratize important White House functions in a particular fashion referred to as the "standard model." According to Pfiffner (2005, 224), "The major elements of the standard model include, most importantly, a chief of staff, a specialized internal hierarchy, and a regularized policy development process." The purpose of the model is to routinize the use of multiple advocacy processes (see George 1980), "assuring that presidential decisions will be made in the light of full information concerning available options and the preferences of relevant actors" (Walcott and Hult 2005, 304).

5. 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).

6. For examples of explicitly theory-oriented research on the MO model, see Meier and O'Toole (2004) and O'Toole and Meier (1999).

7.  $O$  is some measure of outcome,  $S$  is a measure of stability, and  $M$  denotes management. Management divides into three parts:  $M_1$  denotes management's contribution to organizational stability through additions to hierarchy and structure as well as regular operations,  $M_3$  denotes management's efforts to exploit the environment of the organization, and  $M_4$  denotes management's effort to buffer the unit from environmental shocks.  $X$  is a vector of environmental forces,  $\epsilon$  is an error term, the other subscripts denote time periods, and  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  are estimable parameters.

8. Thus far, the primary mode of measuring the key explanatory concepts of the MO model has been through survey questionnaires measuring managerial experiences and attitudes. Later in this article, we note that scholars can also use alternative measurement strategies (including qualitative methodologies).

9. O'Toole and Meier (2003) identify five separate types of stability: structural, mission, production or technology, procedural, and personnel.

10.  $M_2$  is not explicitly included in the empirical model, as the two components of  $M_2$  (i.e.,  $M_3$  and  $M_4$ ) are featured independently.

11. Acts of exploiting opportunities include examples of 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.

12. Accordingly, the ratio of  $M_3$  to  $M_4$ , referred to as  $M_2$ , measures how risk averse or risk seeking a particular organization is. Thus, as efforts to exploit the environment increase, so does the value of the ratio.

13. Future scholars can track many types of managerial phenomena in White House bureaucracies, thereby collecting

relevant data over the next several years. For example, surveying key current and former administrative officials can yield useful cross-sectional, and eventually, time-series measures of managerial attitudes and preferences, as has previously been done with school district superintendents in Texas and municipal government officials in the United Kingdom.

14. We wish to make clear that the research designs using the MO model need not necessarily be quantitative. Although the literature that has thus far used the MO model to explain output has been exclusively quantitative, the core components of the MO model are conceptual. As a result, scholars can also use the model to guide qualitative analyses of causal inference.

15. Notable among this work is scholarship on the chief of staff (Cohen 1997, 2002; Cohen and Krause 2000; Cohen, Dolan, and Rosati 2002; Pfiffner 1999b; Walcott, Warshaw, and Wayne 2001), the staff secretary (Hult and Tenpas 2001), the press secretary (Kumar 2001; Nelson 2000; Spragens and Terwoord 1980; Towle 1997), or any number of additional cabinet secretaries, department heads, or agency chiefs (see also Kumar and Sullivan 2003; Pfiffner 1999a). Additional studies examine the role of the president as manager within the institution of the presidency (i.e., Arnold 1998; Nathan 1983; Rudalevige 2002; Moe 1999).

16. See, for example, research by Cohen (1997) and Towle (1997) on the role chiefs of staff play in the organizational presidency.

17. See Hult and Walcott (1998, 2002) for more on the importance of organization for the production of presidential rhetoric.

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