

PowerPost

White House women want to be in the room where it happens

By Juliet Eilperin

September 13, 2016

When President Obama took office, two-thirds of his top aides were men. Women complained of having to elbow their way into important meetings. And when they got in, their voices were sometimes ignored.



The Post is exploring how women gain, consolidate and experience power in politics and policy.

So female staffers adopted a meeting strategy they called “amplification”: When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own.

“We just started doing it, and made a purpose of doing it. It was an everyday thing,” said one former Obama aide who requested anonymity to speak frankly. Obama noticed, she and others said, and began calling more often on women and junior aides.

For decades, women have struggled to crack the code of power in the White House, where grueling hours, hyper-aggressive colleagues and lack of access to the boss have proved challenging to women from both parties. The West Wing is also home to the ultimate glass ceiling: Men have had a lock on the Oval Office for more than 200 years.

ADVERTISING



An advertisement for Brownberry Organic bread. The background is a vibrant green with a subtle pattern of wheat stalks. On the left, there is a logo for "NEW! BROWNBERRY EST. 1946 ORGANIC" with a wheat stalk icon. In the center, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue V-neck shirt, stands in a kitchen behind a wooden cutting board. On the cutting board are sliced vegetables and a loaf of bread. To her right is a package of "NEW! BROWNBERRY ORGANIC WHOLE GRAIN BREAD". At the top right of the ad, it says "CLICK TO FIND NEAR YOU". At the bottom, in large white letters, it says "THIS IS MY BREAD."

10/2/2018 White House women want to be in the room where it happens - The Washington Post
That could change if Democrat Hillary Clinton prevails in November. Not only would she break a gender barrier by winning the presidency, she also could bring in a female chief of staff — another first in the White House — as she did as first lady, as a senator and as Obama’s secretary of state.

During Obama’s second term, women gained parity with men in the president’s inner circle; Clinton has actually had women outnumber men at times among her senior staff.

Despite his barbs directed against women, GOP nominee Donald Trump [has installed some female managers](#) while working in the male-dominated construction industry, and he has at least three women playing senior roles in his campaign.

The White House is unlike any workplace in America. Power is defined by proximity to a single individual: the president. Being “in the room” — whether it’s the Oval Office or the 7:30 a.m. senior staff meeting where the chief of staff hashes out the administration’s top priorities — is crucial to exerting influence.

And the job is a constant race against the clock: Presidents have as few as four years to pursue an agenda and cement a legacy. Burnout is endemic, and top White House aides typically leave after less than three years.

WOMEN IN THE WHITE HOUSE
Posted by Washington Post
34,944 Views

“Given the short period you are in the White House, you leverage every minute to ensure that you can be there, fully committed and totally present,” said Juleanna Glover, who served as press secretary to Vice President Richard B. Cheney during President George W. Bush’s first term.

10/2/2018 White House women want to be in the room where it happens - The Washington Post
Women often struggle just to get a foot in the door. Presidents typically select their most senior advisers from the male-dominated ranks of their campaigns. As late as the Eisenhower administration, the only women working in the West Wing were secretaries — and they were barred from dining with men in the White House mess.

“Regardless of the weather, we had to slog out to any hole-in-the-wall we could find,” recalled Patty Herman, who worked there until she met and married the White House correspondent for CBS. “Now, I understand, that’s changed.”

Once your foot is in the door, you have to get a seat at the table. Anne Wexler, who served as Jimmy Carter’s assistant for public outreach, complained that Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan never invited her to a key daily meeting where aides offered ideas to the president, even though Jordan publicly described Wexler as “the most competent woman in Democratic politics.”

“Personally, I never spent a great deal of time with the president,” Wexler said in a 1980 interview for Carter’s presidential library. “I think that was a mistake on [Carter’s] part.”

Bonnie Newman got a job in the Reagan administration in 1981 after playing squash with Helene von Damm, who had acted as Ronald Reagan’s personal secretary since the 1960s. Although von Damm had “access and proximity” to the president, Newman recalled, “there weren’t a whole lot of other women” in the West Wing. “So when you looked around, you looked a little out of place.”

In Bill Clinton’s presidency, several women gained greater influence, including the first lady, who spearheaded his signature health-care reform initiative. But Hillary Clinton retreated to a more traditional role after the initiative foundered. And the president’s affair with intern Monica Lewinsky served to undermine his claims of gender progress.

In the early days of the Obama administration, the West Wing was a well-documented bastion of testosterone, due largely to the dominating roles of men such as Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, now mayor of Chicago, and then-economic adviser Lawrence H. Summers. At a dinner in November 2009, several senior female aides complained to the president that men enjoyed greater access and often muscled them out of key policy discussions.

“If you didn’t come in from the campaign, it was a tough circle to break into,” said Anita Dunn, who left her post as White House communications director shortly after that meeting. Dunn says it was a matter of simple math: “Given the makeup of the campaign, there were just more men than women.”

The atmosphere has changed considerably in Obama’s second term. Many of the original players have moved on. Today, Obama’s closest aides — the ones who sit in the 7:30 a.m. meeting and earn the top White House salary of \$176,461 a year — are equally divided between men and women. Overall, the average man still earns about 16 percent more than the average woman. But half of all White House departments — from the National Security Council to the Office of Legislative Affairs — are headed by women.

“I think having a critical mass makes a difference,” said White House senior adviser Valerie Jarrett, who came in with the president and remains one of his top aides. “It’s fair to say that there was a lot of testosterone flowing in

10/2/2018 White House women want to be in the room where it happens - The Washington Post
those early days. Now we have a little more estrogen that provides a counterbalance.

National security adviser Susan E. Rice also has served throughout Obama's administration. In previous positions, Rice said, she had to push to get into key gatherings. "It's not pleasant to have to appeal to a man to say, 'Include me in that meeting,'" she said.

Now, said Domestic Policy Council Director Cecilia Muñoz said, "the folks who were jockeying to get into meetings or struggling over manifests are just kind of not around anymore."

Even the speaking order in such meetings can make a difference. Toward the end of George W. Bush's second term, legislative affairs director Candi Wolff and press secretary Dana Perino sat at the ends of Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten's long table, and spoke first because the legislative and media climate were more relevant than new policy proposals at that point.

"It was Dana and me, tag-teaming," Wolff recalled.

Second terms have traditionally served as a critical period for women, an opportunity to move up after the men move out. After Obama's reelection, Jennifer Palmieri replaced Dan Pfeiffer as communications director. She remembers the moment the president expressed his confidence in her and shared his high expectations.

"This is it, you're in the room. There is no other room: This is the Oval Office," Palmieri recalls him saying. "You're here for a reason, and I want to know what you think."

Sylvia Mathews Burwell, secretary of health and human services, describes a "woman pull" during Clinton's second term, when she was promoted from deputy chief of staff to deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget. Another woman, Maria Echaveste, got Burwell's former position, and a third woman, Minyon Moore, moved into Echaveste's spot.

In George W. Bush's second term, Condoleezza Rice and Margaret Spellings were promoted to the Cabinet, becoming secretary of state and secretary of education, respectively. Other women moved into more senior White House jobs, including Wolff and Perino.

Regardless of when they served, women described a constant struggle to balance work and family, especially if they had young children. After Bush was elected in 2000, longtime aide Karen Hughes said she recoiled when incoming Chief of Staff Andrew Card tried to establish a 24/7 work schedule.

Hughes said she called Bush and told him that she didn't "have to be there at 10:30 at night" to do her job.

Bush responded quickly, Hughes said, telling Card: "Don't run off all my working mothers!"

Although Card made accommodations, Hughes left the White House after a year and a half, saying the job was too hard on her "homesick" Texas family. That fact hit her one Saturday morning, she said, when her teenage son asked her to bake him some brownies and she was simply too exhausted to do it.

10/9/2018 White House women want to be in the room where it happens The Washington Post
Sarah Bianchi had two children under 3 when she joined the White House in June 2011 as a deputy assistant to the president and the vice president's head of economic policy. She left in May 2014 to return to the private sector.

"Half the battle from there is parenting," Bianchi said. "We're just not doing well enough on this."

White House aides say a slew of recent changes has improved conditions for working mothers. Last year, when legislative affairs director Katie Beirne Fallon and public engagement director Paulette Aniskoff were pregnant, the General Services Administration set up a tasteful Japanese screen in a West Wing bathroom to provide a private spot for pumping breast milk. (Years earlier, then-Deputy Chief of Staff Alyssa Mastromonaco had successfully procured a tampon machine.)

Meanwhile, the administration encourages staff to take advantage of up to 12 weeks of paid medical and family leave — a much more generous benefit than what most federal workers receive.

Aniskoff said she assumed she would have to quit when her son was born but decided to stay after Jarrett helped her work out the logistics.

"Even though I know theoretically that we had paid leave and all these things," Aniskoff said, "I just didn't know that it applied to me."

Karen Tumulty contributed to this report.

[Loretta Lynch says women face risk of 'not being seen.' She speaks from experience.](#)

[Wanted: Female candidates for federal office](#)

[She's been a secret weapon in Congress for 40 years. Here's how she's seen power change.](#)

 **143 Comments**



Juliet Eilperin

Juliet Eilperin is The Washington Post's senior national affairs correspondent, covering how the new administration is transforming a range of U.S. policies and the federal government itself. She is the author of two books — one on sharks and another on Congress, not to be confused with each other — and has worked for The Post since 1998.

Follow 

The Washington Post

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.