



Q&A: Preparing to Engage with a New Presidential Administration

DECEMBER 4, 2024

On December 4th, we featured New York City SSN chapter leader [Dr. Heath A. Brown](#) and activist, author, and policy analyst Dara Baldwin for a Q&A event focused on the transition to a new presidential administration—and how researchers can remain authentic to their beliefs while doing meaningful work in community with unfamiliar or even seemingly adversarial policy actors.

Dr. Heath A. Brown is Associate Professor of Public Policy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Dr. Brown's focus is on interest group politics, nonprofit organizations, and public policy. He has published scholarship on presidential transitions, education policy, and immigration.

Dara Baldwin is President of DMadrina, LLC, a consultant firm working with organizations around the world to incorporate intersectional policy agendas with an emphasis on disability justice. Her debut nonfiction book [To Be A Problem: A Black Woman's Survival in the Racist Disability Rights Movement](#) was released July 2024 by Beacon Press. She has held senior level positions in federal policy at multiple organizations.

Here are some highlights from the conversation:

On what researchers should know about the transition period between two presidential administrations:

Heath Brown: “The transition team are all trying to help the new administration get ready, and they're focused in teams on three things: **personnel**, **policy**, and **agency review**. There's probably somebody on the personnel team who is focused on your issue, focused on getting an appointment for the issue that you care about. There's also probably somebody on a policy team that's focused on the issue that you care about from the perspective of policy making. And then finally, there's somebody on the agency review team focused on the specific sub-agency that's in charge of the program you care about—I think this time they're calling it landing teams, but they're essentially providing the same function.”

Personnel—the types of nominees advocates and activists focus on for an incoming administration:

Heath Brown: “Staffing, appointments and nominations are the most important things because it's the main thing that has to happen for the incoming administration. The estimates are something around 4,000 positions can be filled by the new administration.

When activists and advocates are interested in having their 2 cents added to the conversation, they're often focused on who the nominees are going to be, and I would contend most advocates aren't focused on the Cabinet. Cabinet of course, matters, but if you're working on a specific issue, chances are the Secretary or the Director of the Agency isn't going to be directly involved in what you're interested in.

It's the sub cabinet positions that hold the most influence and power over the things that you care about. It's getting to know those names. Those are names that we don't hear until very late in the transition period. But those are the decisions that are really being made right now. The cabinet decisions are typically made before the election in a normal transition.”

Policy—the important role of transition teams focused on policy:

Heath Brown: “Policy teams focus on the key issues of the incoming administration. They tend to vary but they are typically on the major issues: foreign policy, domestic policy, immigration policy, education policy.

There tends to be clusters of experts. They work very secretively. We don't know who's on those teams. Those team names are never released. They're doing very significant work, but in a very non-transparent way. So with the work that was going on in 2020, we just didn't know what was happening until long afterwards.

The most direct evidence we have from the policy work of the transition team is what comes out on day one of the administration—the executive orders. It's the most direct form of policymaking that a president has the power to do and it's what makes up most of the time of the policy part of the transition team.

Experts write the executive orders on the key priorities of the new administration into executive action in some fashion. If they do this well, the initial agenda of the new administration is going to be successful. If they do it not so well—if those executive orders are rejected by the courts—then they are ineffective.”

Agency review—the challenges of knowing who to reach

Heath Brown: “Despite the fact that the law requires people involved in the agency review process to be made public, that hasn't happened yet.

It happened in 2020. It happened in 2016. It's happened previously, but has not happened right now. So if you were interested in providing information to the agency review team for the Department of Education, for example, you'd be hard pressed to figure out exactly who that person is. It's the exact reason you need to know people like my colleague Dara Baldwin.

While we may not know who those people are, people who are insiders do because those names start to circulate and the name game is one of the things that goes on outside the transition team. Talking to people like Dara, who know this so well is really the right way to go. They know who's on those teams. And that's the real expertise that an organization like SSN needs to connect with because if you don't know who's doing this work, you'd be hard pressed to have the influence that you might like."

On the transparency of the transition team during the Obama Administration:

Dara Baldwin: "We actually had an open process when President Obama took his office.

We all met at a Hilton here in DC, in a very large conference room at a very large big conference table where everyone could have a seat, come and talk about your issues and what's going to happen. We knew who the transition team was. They actually came and we started calling ourselves the Big Table. And for the eight years that the Obamas were in the White House, they called it the People's House. And every Tuesday evening at 6:00 PM, we met and discussed different issues.

For me, if they were talking about anything related to disabilities or around housing, we would go and attend and they would ask us what is happening right in the streets? What do you need? What's going on? And we'd have those conversations.

Unfortunately, that all ended when the Obamas left, but that was the most transparent transition I've ever seen."

On having inside knowledge of sub-level positions:

Dara Baldwin: "I do disability work, and the Republicans claim disability because they passed the ADA (Americans with Disability Act). So I have more access to Republican offices and Republican lobbyists. So I talk to both sides. That's how I've always done my work, so I have a little more access.

We are hearing about who's coming up and who's going to be nominated or even thought of for those sub-level positions. If you know a person who runs the department, they don't really run it. They have an agenda and they pass it on. You cannot micromanage in DC—you will not get it done. That's not how things run here. So we're learning who those sub-levels will be underneath the secretaries, assistant secretaries, the directors of departments—which are usually political appointees."

On working with the Biden Administration to get some last actions out before they leave office:

Dara Baldwin: "What is happening now in DC and especially in social justice work—which, for many of you, is where most of your research is going to go towards—is that it's a hostile environment, let's not lie. And so what

many social justice organizations are doing is having conversations with those secretaries, right? Secretary of the Department of Education, Secretary of the Department of DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services). What is it that you have not gotten done that needs to be done before you have to leave? Can we get it done? Can we get some rules out?

I will tell you, yesterday was International Day for DI Disabilities. We made sure we got out the [subminimum wage rule](#). If you haven't seen that, it went out yesterday. We all worked on this very hard to make sure the Department of Labor got that out before they leave this office and I can see information on what that is."

On personnel having institutional knowledge:

Dara Baldwin: "The next part of that personnel conversation, which is very important and important to your work, is who's going to be left behind? Who has institutional knowledge? Who knows this department and what's going to happen? So we're having those conversations with the directors of departments, Another example, in the Department of Justice (DOJ), we have an Office of Disability Rights (ODR). It took us a long time to get that director. Rebecca Bond is the director. She is the first cousin of civil rights activist Julian Bond. So Rebecca has been here for years. She had FTEs, full-time employment positions, and we finally got them all filled.

When 45 came in, a lot of people retired, and we literally had to start over with new people. And what is very difficult in DC when you do that is that those new people have no institutional knowledge. And so you are starting all over again about explaining laws.

...Committee staffers usually stay—they get paid more money, they get benefits. And it really doesn't matter who's chair or who is not, you're going to do your work.

Those are actually the staffers you really want to talk to as a researcher. You want to get your work to them because they're the ones who write the bills."

On the importance of pushing forward (for researchers harboring anxiety or anger):

Dara Baldwin: "I'm blessed at Georgetown. We're not getting rid of DEI, I'm able to teach social justice. That's not going to happen to everyone around the country.

...I would tell you to please partner with social justice organizations, with organizations who are really doing the work. You want to push forward and make sure it's being done correctly. If they're doing work around equity and your research area is housing, there are really great groups.

The work must continue.

What I would suggest to all of you is that over the next, at least two years—because when you have a Congress we're hoping things could change—keep doing your research. Keep reaching out to the people who you reached out to. You might have to find new ways of getting your information out, but understand and know that it's still needed and there are people who are still interested in it.

And you might come out of your academic conferences and start going to social justice conferences or even go into town hall meetings where the community is there [and they want to hear what you have to say]. There are different ways in which to use academia, and we want to make sure that happens.”

On holding on to hope:

Dara Baldwin: “I'll tell you, as an academic, my friends keep asking me, what keeps you going, Dara? How do you just keep doing this?”

These young people in my classes. I have no qualms, no fears about the future. Because these young people are serious about creating change, about being inclusive. When I came to disability work in 2009, nobody said the word disability. Nobody knew what reasonable accommodations was. In the housing movement, they only said affordable. And I said no, accessible and affordable. Now I read a report from you wonderful researchers and it says we need accessible and affordable housing. So don't tell me that things can't change and don't tell me that things will never be what we want. Understand and know who you are as a person in this world, and that if you don't stay hopeful, then it won't get done.”