

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-249](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies' ethics programs seek to prevent conflicts of interest and safeguard the integrity of governmental decision-making.

GAO was asked to review compliance with ethics requirements for political appointees in the executive branch. This report examines the extent to which (1) existing data identify political appointees serving in the executive branch, and (2) selected agencies use internal controls to reasonably ensure that their ethics programs are designed and implemented to meet statutory and regulatory requirements.

GAO reviewed available data on political appointees. GAO also reviewed three case study agencies selected to provide a range in agency size and number of political appointees. GAO reviewed ethics documentation for a nongeneralizable sample of political appointees at the three agencies at any point between January 2017 and 2018 and interviewed officials from the agencies and two non-governmental organizations.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider legislation requiring the publication of political appointees serving in the executive branch. GAO also recommends three actions: SBA should document that training was completed; Interior should conduct more strategic planning for its ethics workforce and document ethics program policies and procedures. SBA neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO's recommendation, but provided documentation that partially addresses the recommendation. Interior agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-249](#). For more information, contact Tranchau (Kris) T. Nguyen at (202) 512-6806 or NguyenTT@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL ETHICS PROGRAMS

Government-wide Political Appointee Data and Some Ethics Oversight Procedures at Interior and SBA Could Be Improved

What GAO Found

There is no single source of data on political appointees serving in the executive branch that is publicly available, comprehensive, and timely. Political appointees make or advocate policy for a presidential administration or support those positions. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and two nongovernmental organizations collect, and in some cases, report data on political appointees, but the data are incomplete. For example, the data did not include information on political appointee positions within the Executive Office of the President. The White House Office of Presidential Personnel (PPO) maintains data but does not make them publicly available.

The public has an interest in knowing the political appointees serving and this information would facilitate congressional oversight and hold leaders accountable. As of March 2019, no agency in the federal government is required to publicly report comprehensive and timely data on political appointees serving in the executive branch. OPM is positioned to maintain and make political appointee data publicly available on a timely basis but is limited in its ability to provide comprehensive data. PPO has more comprehensive data but may not be positioned to publish data on a recurring basis. Ultimately, it is a policy decision as to which agency is best positioned to report comprehensive and timely data on political appointees.

All three agencies GAO reviewed generally used appropriate internal controls to ensure they met basic ethics program requirements, though two of the agencies could take actions to strengthen their ethics programs.

- The Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Interior (Interior), and the Small Business Administration (SBA) all have procedures for administering their financial disclosure systems. HHS and Interior had procedures for providing initial ethics training as required beginning in January 2017. Prior to February 2019 SBA did not have written procedures for initial ethics training and did not adequately document political appointees' training dates. SBA's written procedures now reflect the requirements of initial ethics training and SBA developed a tracking sheet to indicate appointees completed training. GAO will assess the implementation of the tracking sheet to confirm the process is sufficient for documenting appointees' completion of initial ethics training.
- Interior's ethics program has human capital and workforce continuity challenges. Interior reported that four out of 14 full-time positions were vacant. Interior officials attributed the vacancies to a recent transformation of the ethics program and prioritizing the staffing at individual bureaus such as the National Park Service. However, vacancies affected the ethics program's ability to properly document policies and procedures as well as file and review financial disclosure forms. According to Interior officials, steps are being taken to address vacancies and document policies and procedures. However, GAO found that a more strategic and documented approach would enable Interior to better manage human capital, fill key positions, and maintain institutional knowledge.