

Surviving Silly Season: Coping with the Voters' Decision

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

My February column spoke to how career civil servants might run the election year gauntlet, and survive the stress and tension of an election year.



When this issue goes to press, the November elections will be only a few short weeks away. The period from November, 2012, into January, 2013, in many ways will pose the most career challenges of the entire electoral cycle.

Approaching the Finish Line

I once worked for a United States senator. Late one evening at the end of a Congress as we were waiting on the Senate floor for a vote to take place, he opined that the average American doesn't get preoccupied with election year politics until after the World Series is over. While that might have been a slight exaggeration, it is certainly true that the last month of a campaign is the most intense for everyone. Political appointees and the elected officials for whom they work will be at the peak of stress and fatigue. Tempers will be shorter than usual. Distractions from the day-to-day job of running an agency will be frequent and unavoidable. Every event that could affect any voter's attitude will take on great and probably disproportionate significance. As a result, career civil servants may feel like they are walking on eggshells.

In this final run-up to the election, one typically observes two phenomena in an agency. First is the drive to expedite any action that may be perceived as helpful to the incumbent. If awarding a contract, approving a grant, publishing a regulation, or issuing a policy statement is perceived as producing net positive votes for the incumbent, then there will be great pressure to get it done before

the election. The problem is that often there will be a desire to take shortcuts with standard operating procedures in order to achieve deadlines desired by political campaigns. The challenge for the career civil servant is how to be responsive without creating or being party to a process that cannot withstand public or judicial scrutiny after the election. A career civil servant, particularly a senior one, does not want to appear disloyal by insisting that the agency cannot do what the political leadership wants to do the way they want to do it.

Being Loyal While Being Smart

There are three ways to avoid such a predicament. First, know your agency processes thoroughly enough so that you can confidently lay out a timeline for any particular action when it is first proposed. In that way, unreasonable expectations do not have a chance to settle in the mind of your political boss. Second, know where there is legitimate flexibility in the timeline of an agency process, so you can lay out scenarios that are still legitimate but can get the agency to meet a desired deadline. For instance, perhaps it has been customary to allow 90 days for public comment on an agency action before it goes final, but the actual minimum statutory requirement is for no less than 30 days. You may be able to save your boss 60 days. Thirdly, be ready with creative viable alternatives to the ideal course of action. Identify ways to produce many of the benefits without running afoul of procedural requirements. For instance, while it may not be possible to publish a final regulation before the election, it may well be quite feasible to publish a draft regulation. A savvy press secretary can produce almost the same political benefit from either action.

The second phenomenon one typically observes near the end of an election year is the opposite of the first. Instead

of eagerly trying to accelerate an action, this time the agency political leadership wants to delay something until after the election. Sometimes this is because the action in question is perceived as a political loser. Other times, it is simply a matter of priorities. If an action is viewed as competing for management's attention with matters that are political winners, leadership may just not want the distraction in the last few weeks before an election. Unless there is a statutory or court-ordered deadline associated with the matter headed for the slow lane, there is seldom any harm in letting a matter slide for a few weeks or even months. If there are important consequences of delaying an action, inform the political leadership so they make a truly informed decision.

If you are offended by the thought of a politically insignificant but bureaucratically useful action being put on the back burner, then volunteer to take the matter off your political boss' plate, and handle it yourself. If you do make that offer, though, be certain that your new task does not interfere with your ability to be responsive to the clear priorities of your political leadership.

After the Votes are Counted

If the incumbent is reelected, then the agency's pressure cooker atmosphere will rapidly dissipate. While there may well be some turnover at the political level in the agency as the new term begins, that will happen in a leisurely and relatively stress-free way. Late November through January will be a time for taking care of loose ends, dealing with matters that were not high enough priority to be addressed in October or early November.

If, on the other hand, the voters decide that it is time for a change, then a new set of challenges confront the career civil servant.

Inevitably, the outgoing administration will be concerned with locking in its "legacy." Signature initiatives of the

outgoing administration or agency head will become overwhelming preoccupations as the outgoing team struggles against time to complete its priorities. This will probably mean a period of heightened activity for many career civil servants. They will try to support the legitimate desires of their political bosses as they exhibit a final burst of energy on their way out the door. One risk is that routine but important activity may suffer from inattention. This can happen if the outgoing political leadership sees little value in investing any of their now-severely limited time on routine matters.

The career civil servant's predicament may become considerably more complicated, and risky, if one of the priority initiatives of the outgoing leadership team is anathema to the incoming leadership team. One's future bosses will certainly be watching closely to see what "mischief" is perpetrated in the final weeks of the outgoing administration. In many cases, when there is a transition team to facilitate the changing of the guard, the incoming team very deliberately creates an inventory of every significant action that took place in an agency after election day. Considerable thought will be given as to whether and how some of those actions might be reversed in the first few weeks that the new team is in power.

The incoming team will usually be mildly sympathetic to the idea that career civil servants have an obligation to follow the legitimate instructions of the outgoing political appointees. After all, they will want and deserve the same deference to their own judgments. However, they will also be alert to any signs that particular career civil servants were unnecessarily energetic or enthusiastic in pursuing policies opposed by the incoming team. The fine line that the civil servant needs to walk is therefore to appear to be responsive and professional to the outgoing political leadership without becoming perceived by the incoming team as an overzealous enthusiast of the previous administration. This is a time to do things "by the book," without being dilatory. It is not unheard of for career civil servants to exercise bureaucratic methods to stall actions of the outgoing team that they know are

opposed by their future bosses. However, this behavior is inappropriate, and undercuts arguments that you will later want to make to the new team about the objectivity and professionalism of the civil service.

Burrowing In and Tuning Out

A change in administration often is accompanied by a phenomenon known as "burrowing in," where individuals who occupied political appointments are converted into career civil service positions. The outgoing team may employ this practice for a variety of reasons. Motivations may vary from the benign, where a former political appointee truly enjoys government service and is eager to continue it, albeit in a different capacity. It may be motivated by practical considerations; it is a tough job market out there. Unfortunately, the incoming political team will almost always tend to take a sinister view of such appointments, viewing them as an effort to plant partisan saboteurs and spies into the agency, in jobs from which they can undercut the efforts of the new political leadership.

Each jurisdiction has its own rules about such practices, and whatever those may be, it is vitally important for responsible government human resource management professionals to ensure that those rules are followed to the letter. For example, in some jurisdictions, the requirement is that any such conversion takes place before election day, or some number of days before the new regime is sworn in.

For the burrower, the experience can be mixed. It certainly is great to have a job when your former political colleagues are job-hunting. However, the newly minted career civil servant's political pedigree will be noticed by the new regime. I have seen situations where the burrower became a perennial outsider, never fully accepted by the career civil servants who came up through the ranks, and never trusted by the political



leadership from the incoming administration. That can make for a lonely work life, and is an eventuality the prospective burrower needs to consider before making the move.

Another post-election challenge facing civil servants when the incumbent loses is the natural tendency of the outgoing political appointees to become preoccupied with finding a new job. They will not be quite as focused on agency operations. It also means that as individuals find new jobs, the leadership ranks in the agency will start to thin, and it may be more difficult to find someone in a position of authority to make decisions.

Elections are part of the natural and essential rhythm of American society. They do pose challenges for civil servants. By exercising some care, those challenges can be overcome. You can position yourself for future success, and you will be ready when the next election cycle kicks in.

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