

Influencing Policy at the Top of the Federal Bureaucracy: A Comparison of Career and Political Senior Executives

Although we commonly assume that bureaucrats influence the policies which govern public behavior, we know very little about the individuals who occupy executive positions in the federal bureaucracy. Following the creation of the Senior Executive Service (SES) in 1978, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) published guidelines detailing the skills and responsibilities required among both career and noncareer members of the SES. Although scholars have focused much attention on relations between these two groups within the federal bureaucracy, their day-to-day responsibilities remain understudied. This study reports results of a survey that was administered to 1,000 members of the Senior Executive Service to determine whether career and noncareer members of the SES have significantly different job responsibilities. Although both groups perform a variety of activities which provide them with numerous avenues to affect government policy, the research findings indicate that noncareer executives are more engaged in carrying out political liaison tasks and that career executives have slightly greater personnel responsibilities.

Since the demise of the politics-administration dichotomy, we can no longer assume that public bureaucrats simply and neutrally implement the will of the legislative branch. Studies confirm that both career and political administrators contribute to policy making at the top of the federal bureaucracy (Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981; Hecl 1977; Rourke 1984). However, those specific duties and responsibilities which enable federal administrators to affect policy making are not entirely clear. Forty-two years ago, Marver Bernstein (1958, 1) lamented that “the executive’s job in government is itself a proper subject of inquiry. Indeed, there is very little published information on what federal executives really do.” Writing some twenty years later, Hugh Hecl (1977, 1) similarly remarked, “very little information is available about the working world and everyday conduct of the top people in government.” Since then, case study research has detailed the extraordinary public service efforts of a few high-ranking officials (Ricucci 1995; Cooper and Wright 1992; Kaufman 1981; Lewis 1980), yet the work environment of federal executives across the entire government remains underexplored.

Today, the vast majority of federal executives are part of the Senior Executive Service (SES). Created under the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA), the SES is designed as an elite corps of civil servants “to ensure that the executive management of the Government of the United States is responsive to the needs, policies and goals of the Nation” (Title 5, U.S.C § 3131). Furthermore, the SES was expected to augment career executives’ power and responsibility vis-a-vis political executives without sacrificing their protected civil service status (Huddleston 1987; Ingraham and Ban 1986). Toward these ends, the CSRA prohibits political appointees from occupying greater than 10 percent of the total number of SES positions and more than 25 percent of the SES positions within a single agency and classifies some positions as “career reserved” (Title 5, U.S.C. § 3132–4).¹

Julie Dolan is an assistant professor of political science and public administration at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research interests include bureaucratic and executive branch politics, women and politics, and Congress. She has published articles in the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, PS: Political Science and Politics, and Women and Politics. Email: jdolan@vcu.edu

This article uses two sets of questions to explore the everyday working responsibilities of both career and non-career members of the SES. First, what are the typical responsibilities of an SES member? Since Bernstein and Hecló long ago lamented the dearth of knowledge on this topic, we still know very little about the daily activities of current federal executives. What tools do SES members use to shape policy in Washington? To what extent are they involved in budgeting, personnel, policy and program decisions? Are they called upon to bargain and negotiate with other political players in Washington?

Second, this article examines whether career and non-career members command significantly different responsibilities within the SES. Since it is widely recognized that career and political executives bring different talents and perspectives to their jobs, their responsibilities may likewise vary. Compared to their political colleagues, career executives' experiences and tenure in office supplies them with a longer time perspective, greater technical expertise and knowledge of government operations and procedures, and more established networks of relationships with other political actors. In contrast, political appointees bring fresh, new ideas to government as they strive to carry out the president's policy priorities (Bernstein 1958; Hecló 1977; Aberbach and Rockman 1981; Rourke 1984; Light 1987; NAPA 1989; Volcker 1989; Michaels 1997). Further, many scholars have chronicled the efforts of President Reagan² to diminish the influence of career executives by excluding them from policy-making networks (Aberbach and Rockman 1990; Ingraham 1987; Ingraham and Ban 1986; Newland 1983; Pfiffner 1987b) or by getting them "out of the policy action and into strictly managerial or technical roles" (Rockman 1993). Other studies, such as the Volcker Commission, suggest that the phenomenon of "creeping appointeeism," the process by which political appointees infiltrate further and further into positions to which career executives would normally aspire, diminishes career executives' career opportunities and access to influential positions (Hecló 1977; Ingraham, Thompson, and Eisenberg 1995; Light 1995; Michaels 1997; Pfiffner 1987b; Volcker 1989). As such, one might also question whether career and non-career executives are entrusted with different job responsibilities.

Previous Studies and Hypotheses

Although over 7,000 individuals occupy a variety of Senior Executive Service positions and are spread throughout the entire government, career and non-career executives perform some common activities and have similar responsibilities. Despite disagreements over whether all SES members should be labeled as senior executives (Clinton and Newburg 1984), the U.S. Office of Personnel

Management (OPM) defines five common Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) as necessary for all SES members to effectively perform their jobs: strategic vision, human resource management, program development and evaluation, resource planning and management, and organizational representation and liaison. This article first examines the extent to which SES members' responsibilities correspond with these OPM executive qualifications.

Second, this article compares responsibilities according to status in the SES. Organizational liaison responsibilities are the first focus. Research that focuses on senior executives often stresses the importance of their relationships with other political actors. Drawing from a series of roundtable discussions with 24 career and political executives, Bernstein (1958) emphasized that both career and political executives affect policy by bargaining and compromising with numerous political actors, including Congress, members of the White House staff and Cabinet, and other executive branch colleagues. They must also know how to interact with interest groups affected by agency policy, and be sensitive to complex interagency matters. Although dated and based on a nonrepresentative sample, Bernstein's study suggests that federal executives spend a good deal of their time interacting with various political actors and command positions that necessitate making policy and political decisions on a daily basis. More recently, a handbook for non-career SES published by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) also emphasizes the importance of bargaining and negotiating with others in Washington: "The federal landscape is crowded with players, many of whom have a legitimate claim to be part of the action. Nothing ever gets done alone in government. Accomplishment is always the product of collective action. The work of cultivating constituencies and building coalitions is what government is all about, and government executives spend much of their time communicating with others who have an interest in what they are doing" (NAPA 1989, 6).

Although we can expect both career and non-career SES members to engage in such liaison activities, presidential efforts to control the bureaucracy over the years will result in greater liaison responsibilities among non-career SES members. Both Nixon and Reagan sought to control the bureaucracy by isolating it from Congress (Aberbach and Rockman 1990; Cole and Caputo 1979) and other scholars have shown presidential attempts to "forge non-career teams working for White House rather than agency priorities" (Maranto 1993, 694) to carry out their policy preferences and priorities. Similarly, Aberbach and Rockman (1990) report that approximately 26 percent more political appointees than career executives were regularly in contact with members of Congress during the late 1980s. Presidents presumably prefer to have an appointed ally

rather than an unknown career executive speaking before Congress and other political actors in Washington. Further, even if Reagan's efforts to control the bureaucracy through loyal appointees have not since been replicated with similar intensity, Pfiffner (1987b, 59) argues that "once an area of administration has been politicized it is virtually impossible to reverse the process. Each new administration feels it is entitled to the same political controls as its predecessor." Although Clinton seemed more intent on putting together "an administration that looked like America" than assuring the ideological loyalty of all his appointees, it would be surprising if he did not continue the practices established before he arrived in office.

H1: Noncareer members of the SES have more responsibility for organizational liaison with other political actors³ than do career members of the SES.

Consistent with presidential efforts to keep career executives isolated from other political actors, one would expect career executives to be less involved in policy and program responsibilities than their noncareer colleagues. In addition to minimizing career senior executives' contacts with other political actors, scholars have reported presidential efforts to remove them from making policy decisions. In a piece advocating that Reagan's appointees use "jigsaw puzzle management," Sanera (1984, 514) resurrects the old politics-administration dichotomy when he advises that "career staff will supply information, but they should never become involved in the formulation of agenda-related policy objectives." Other research suggests that under Reagan "career professional expertise was significantly excluded from the higher levels of policy and implementation" (Michaels 1997, 175) and that careerists "became superfluous to decision making" (Ingraham and Ban 1986, 158). Further, in a more recent report published by the U.S. General Accounting Office (1992), noncareer SES members are more likely than their career counterparts to report that they exercise substantial influence over program development within their departments.

H2: Noncareer members of the SES will report greater involvement in policy and program responsibilities than career members will.

While noncareer SES members are expected to have greater political liaison responsibilities than their career counterparts, career members will report greater responsibility for budgeting and personnel matters. Given the complexity of both the federal budget process and civil service personnel regulations, career SES with experience working the ins-and-outs of such policies should be more knowledgeable and better equipped to perform such activities. Political appointees routinely report difficulty in dealing with the federal budget and personnel processes. In 1985, 50 percent of the presidential appointees in a NAPA sur-

vey indicated that any orientation program ought to include the federal budget process (Pfiffner 1987a). Over 10 years later, a majority (61 percent) of Bush's top-ranking political appointees reported that they found the budget process generally or very difficult. Majorities likewise indicated that both the federal budget and personnel process were of great importance during any orientation for incoming presidential appointees (Michaels 1997). Perhaps reflecting their own difficulty with the budget and personnel processes, these appointees were also more likely to turn to career members of the SES rather than noncareer members for advice in dealing with both budgeting and personnel matters (Michaels 1997).

H3: Career SES members have greater responsibilities for budgeting and personnel matters within their organizations than do noncareer members.

Data and Methods

The data for this piece come from "The Survey of Senior Executives," an original survey developed especially for this research. It was mailed to a stratified random sample of 1,000 SES employees between November 1996 and January 1997. The OPM generously provided the names and work addresses of 6,591 out of a possible total universe of 7,290 (as of June 1996) SES employees. An OPM official explained that the list contained all the SES members for which OPM had current addresses and that there was no systematic bias to the missing data. Overall, 570 usable surveys were returned, yielding a respectable 59.0 percent response rate after making adjustments for retired SES members (14) and undeliverable addresses (20).

The sample accurately reflects the universe of SES members in terms of various demographic variables such as respondents' length of service in the federal government, pay grade, race, age, education, department, and metropolitan area in which the respondent works (see Table 1). The sample slightly overrepresents highly educated individuals (those with law and doctorate degrees), and underrepresents those with a bachelor's degree or less. This is not particularly surprising as education is usually positively correlated with willingness to respond to mail surveys.

Women were originally oversampled and are thus overrepresented in the sample (46.7 percent of sample, 20.4 percent of universe). In particular, women are overrepresented in the political ranks of the SES (82.0 percent of sample, 38.6 percent of universe). Weights are attached to make the sample reflective of the universe in terms of both gender and type of SES appointment.

After appropriate weighting, the sample remains fairly representative of the universe of SES employees in terms

of respondent's length of service in the federal government, pay grade, race, education, department, and metropolitan area (see Table 1). The sample still overrepresents individuals with graduate degrees and underrepresents those with a bachelor's degree or less. It also overrepresents individuals from the Department of Defense.

To investigate the various hypotheses, the survey inquires about the job responsibilities of SES members. For example, to determine whether meeting with other political actors is a significant part of SES members' jobs, Senior Executive Service members are asked to indicate if meeting with members of Congress, congressional staff, interest group representatives, and individuals from other executive branch agencies or departments constitutes a major, medium, minor, or no part of their job. From these responses, I was able to determine not only who has responsibility for contact with other political players, but also whether this contact is relatively major or minor in the context of their overall duties.

SES members are also asked specifically about their role in explaining the merits of agency policies before other individuals or groups of individuals in Washington. The range of responses ("major" to "no" part of job) helped to determine how common it is for SES members to defend their agency's policies and whether doing so is a relatively large or small part of their job.

To explore SES involvement in policy and program activities, a battery of questions probes what types of program and policy decisions individual SES members routinely perform. For example, members indicate whether they give advice to their supervisors, draft rules and regulations, and initiate policy ideas. Those without such job responsibilities indicated so by answering "not applicable—I do not have responsibility for this activity."

To measure SES involvement in personnel matters, respondents were asked to indicate how often they developed training, promotion, equal opportunity employment, and recruitment policies for their organizations. To assess SES members' involvement in budgeting, respondents were asked whether they make budgetary decisions for their organizations and whether they justified a budget before Congress or OMB within the last year. If such an activity was not part of their job responsibility, they indicated so by marking the "not applicable" category. These data helped to determine whether defending a budget before Congress or OMB is a common responsibility for SES members as well as whether they have done so in the past year.

Table 1 Comparison of SES Sample and SES Universe (in percentages)

	Sample of SES employees (n=570)		Universe of SES employees ¹ (n= 6,985)
	Not weighted	Weighted	
Metropolitan area			
Washington, DC	76	74	73
Other	24	26	27
Race/National Origin			
Black	9	7	7
Hispanic	3	3	2
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	2	1
Native American	1	1	1
White	85	86	87
Not identified	1	1	1
Education			
Bachelor's degree or less	21	20	31
Master's	35	37	35
Law degree ²	23	21	16
Doctorate	22	22	18
Average length of federal government service			
	22 years	22 years	23 years
Average age			
	51 years	52 years	52 years
Average pay grade			
	3.7	3.8	3.6
Type of appointment			
Career	90	91	89
Noncareer (political)	9	9	10
Department/Agency			
Agriculture	6	6	5
Commerce	4	4	5
Defense	18	22	17
Education	1	1	1
Energy	5	6	6
Environmental Protection Agency	5	4	4
General Services Administration	2	2	1
Health and Human Services	10	8	9
Housing and Urban Development	1	1	1
Interior	4	3	4
Justice	4	5	4
Labor	2	1	2
National Science Foundation	2	2	1
NASA	6	7	7
Nuclear Regulatory Commission	3	3	3
Office of Management and Budget	0.4	0.4	1
Securities and Exchange Commission	2	2	1
State	2	2	2
Transportation	4	4	5
Treasury	6	7	8
Veterans Affairs	3	3	4
Other	11	8	10

¹Office of Personnel Management. 1996. *Significant Characteristics of the SES*; Office of Personnel Management. 1995. *The Status of the Senior Executive Service, 1994*.

²The OPM number for law degrees listed here includes MDs. The Survey of Senior Executives grouped MDs with those holding doctorate degrees.

Findings and Discussion—A Profile of Senior Executive Service Members

Overall, OPM’s Executive Core Qualifications provide a fairly accurate description of the activities typical to SES members. The profile of an SES member that emerges from the Survey of Senior Executives (SOSE) data is someone who is clearly involved in many stages of policy formulation and implementation, who has most substantial contact with executive branch colleagues in other agencies and departments, and who exerts some influence over organizational budgetary and personnel matters (see Table 2). The most commonly performed activities among SES members involve making policy decisions, as more than 95 percent report choosing among policy alternatives, setting priorities for their organizations, initiating policy ideas, recommending changes to existing policies and programs, and interpreting and applying laws, regulations, and policies. Thus, virtually all senior executives across the federal government refine and apply government policies,

evaluate and assess existing policies and programs, and implement government directives that emerge from their agencies and departments.

Considering the complexity and overlapping jurisdictions of government programs and policies, it is not surprising that virtually all senior executives (97 percent) also interact with individuals from other departments and agencies. Organizational liaison is a common thread throughout the SES, as clear majorities of senior executives interact with interest group representatives (87 percent), congressional staff (79 percent), their departmental secretaries (71 percent), OMB (62 percent), and members of Congress (57 percent), while slightly less than half meet with other White House staff (47 percent). Closer examination reveals that SES members report considerably more interaction with other executive branch officials (outside of the Executive Office of the President [EOP]) than with congressional or EOP staff (see Table 3). Although they generally have interactions with all three of these groups, interactions with their own supervisor and individuals from other agencies and departments comprise the most substantial components of their jobs. At the opposite end, SES members report that their interactions with White House staff, OMB, members of Congress, and congressional committees are relatively minor components of their jobs.

Budgetary and personnel matters also demand the attention of virtually all SES members. Ninety-two percent make budgetary decisions within their organizations and slightly fewer appear before both Congress (75 percent) and OMB (77 percent) in order to defend their budgets. Most SES members are also involved in personnel matters within their organizations as sizable majorities develop

Activity	% SES who have responsibility
Policy and program involvement	
Keep abreast of new issues and developments in my field	99.6
Choose among alternatives for achieving policy goals	99.0
Set priorities for my organization	99.0
Gather information	98.8
Initiate policy ideas	98.4
Recommend changes/improvements to regulations, policies or programs	97.5
Interpret and apply laws, regulations, and policies	96.6
Draft rules and regulations	81.5
Organizational liaison	
Meet with individuals from other departments and agencies	96.9
Explain merits of policies to supervisor	96.0
Explain merits of policies to individuals in other government agencies	87.4
Meet with interest group representatives	86.5
Meet with congressional staff	79.3
Testify before Congress on policy matters	75.9
Explain merits of policies to my department secretary	70.6
Explain merits of policies to OMB	62.1
Meet with members of Congress	57.2
Explain merits of policies to congressional committees	56.0
Explain merits of policies to White House staff	47.0
Budgeting	
Make budgetary decisions	91.6
Testify before OMB on budget matters	76.8
Testify before Congress on budget matters	75.3
Personnel	
Develop employee training policies	80.2
Develop employee recruitment policies	72.9
Develop employee promotion policies	72.7
Develop equal employment opportunity policies	70.4

Source: Survey of Senior Executives

Activity	Mean score on scale of interaction ^a
Explain merits of policies to my supervisor	3.37
Participate in interdepartmental meetings	3.01
Meet with individuals from other departments or agencies	2.94
Meet with interest group representatives	2.68
Explain merits of policies to members of other government agencies	2.52
Meet with congressional staff	2.29
Explain merits of policies to my department secretary	2.29
Explain merits of policies to OMB	1.94
Explain merits of policies to congressional committees	1.87
Meet with members of Congress	1.79
Explain merits of policies to White House staff	1.66

^aScale ranges from 1 to 4, indicating how substantial of a component the activity is in respondent’s job.
 1= no part at all
 2= minor part
 3= medium part
 4= major part

Source: Survey of Senior Executives

training, recruitment, promotion, and equal employment opportunity policies.

In sum, numerous responsibilities are common to SES positions, providing senior executives with ample opportunities to exercise discretion and influence policy making in the federal government. They make choices about policy development, evaluation, and implementation, have access to numerous other politicians in Washington, contribute to their organization's budgetary decisions, and influence the composition and character of their organization's work force.

The data in Table 4 corroborate hypothesis 1. Contact with other political actors is a more common responsibility for noncareer SES members than it is for career executives. Perhaps reflecting presidential efforts to keep a tight rein over political appointees by keeping them in close contact with White House staff, the greatest difference between the two groups is in their interactions with White House staff. While four out of every five (82 percent) political executives in the sample indicate that explaining the merits of policies to White House staff is a part of their job, only a minority (43 percent) of career SES members do so. Slightly more political SES members also indicate responsibility for explaining the merits of policies to OMB and departmental secretaries, but neither of these differences is statistically significant. Congressional liaison is more common to noncareer SES members as significantly more of them than career executives meet with members of Congress, congressional committees, and congressional staff. This is consistent with previous research reported by Aberbach and Rockman (1990). Although they surveyed political appointees higher up the food chain (those requiring Senate confirmation), they similarly found greater interaction between members of Congress and political executives. Finally, political SES members are more likely to meet with interest group representatives and individuals from other agencies.⁴

Furthermore, with few exceptions, these contacts demand greater involvement from noncareer SES members than from their career counterparts (see Table 5). Most noticeably, political SES members devote significantly greater portions of their time to contact with individuals in the EOP. The most marked difference between career and political SES members is in their interactions with the OMB. While almost one-third of political SES members consider such interactions to be major components of their jobs, only a meager 4 percent of career SES members do. Interactions with other White House staff also command significantly more attention from political than career executives. On a four-point scale measuring the magnitude of various job components, political SES members rate interactions with White House staff a full point higher than their career counterparts. Meeting with inter-

Table 4 SES Members' Common Responsibilities, by Type of SES Appointment

Activity	% SES who have responsibility	
	Career	Political
<i>Explain merits of policies to ...</i>		
Supervisor	96.3	94.0
Individuals in other government agencies and departments	86.1	100.0**
Department secretary	70.0	77.8
Office of Management and Budget	61.2	71.5
Congressional committees	54.4	72.6*
White House staff	42.9	82.0***
<i>Meet with ...</i>		
Interest group representatives	85.2	100.0**
Congressional staff	77.9	93.6***
Members of Congress	54.7	82.9***
<i>Budgeting</i>		
Make budgetary decisions	91.6	94.0
Justify a budget to Congress	74.3	82.2
Justify a budget to OMB	76.0	82.2
<i>Personnel-Develop ...</i>		
Training policies	80.8	74.0
Recruitment policies	73.1	70.6
Promotion policies	73.8	62.0
Equal employment opportunity policies	70.9	64.9
<i>Policy and program involvement</i>		
Keep abreast of issues	99.5	100.0
Gather information	98.7	100.0
Initiate policy ideas	98.3	100.0
Set priorities for organization	98.9	100.0
Recommend changes to regulations, policies, or programs	97.2	100.0
Choose among alternatives for achieving policy goals	98.8	100.0
Interpret and apply laws	97.0	94.1
Draft rules and regulations	81.6	83.1
Career-political differences significant at *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001		
Source: Survey of Senior Executives		

est group representatives also commands greater attention among political executives, as more than twice as many consider this a major component of their jobs (46 percent vs. 22 percent). These findings confirm that political liaison is more central to the political executive's job than the career executive's job. Although members from both groups explain, advocate, and negotiate with political actors inside and outside government, political executives are more intimately involved in sustaining such networks.

The research data do not support hypothesis 2. Virtually every member of the SES makes program and policy decisions and no significant differences exist between the two groups' responsibilities (see Table 4). Although previous studies indicate that career SES members think they are less influential than their noncareer colleagues (Aberbach and Rockman 1990; Stehr 1997), one cannot

Table 5 Relative Components of SES Members' Jobs, by Type of SES Appointment

Activity	Mean score on frequency scale ^a		% SES who consider activity "major" part of job	
	Career	Political	Career	Political
Meet with...				
Individuals from other departments or agencies	2.90	3.37***	28.5	51.0**
Interest group representatives	2.60	3.35***	22.2	46.0**
Congressional staff	2.24	2.72***	10.6	17.8
Members of Congress	1.74	2.31***	4.4	5.0
Explain merits of policies to ...				
My supervisor	3.37	3.44	56.1	64.7
Individuals from other departments or agencies	2.51	2.73	17.0	13.6
Department secretary	2.25	2.79**	13.5	33.2**
Office of Management and Budget	1.87	2.58***	4.4	30.4***
Congressional committees	1.82	2.47***	6.0	20.6*
White House staff	1.56	2.62***	2.0	20.6**

^aScale ranges from 1 to 4, indicating how substantial of a component the activity is in respondent's job.
 1= no part at all
 2= minor part
 3= medium part
 4= major part

Career-political differences significant at *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
 Source: Survey of Senior Executives

conclude that this differential is due to excluding career members from all policy and program responsibilities, at least as measured here.

The survey findings support hypothesis 3, in part, as career members of the SES are more active in developing personnel policies for their organizations, but are no more involved in budgetary decisions. Creating training policies is the most common personnel activity, with 81 percent of career SES and 74 percent of political SES indicating they command such responsibility (see Table 6). Although these differences are not statistically significant, career SES are significantly more likely to have actually done so in the past year (95 percent vs. 82 percent). Slightly fewer SES are responsible for the other personnel activities, but clear majorities report that each activity is a part of their job. Comparing the frequency with which political and career SES performed these activities in the past year, career SES more frequently developed both recruitment, equal opportunity, and promotion policies, but only the differences for recruitment policies are statistically significant. These findings are consistent with expectations given the complexity of civil service personnel regulations. With greater experience working the ins-and-outs of federal personnel policy, career SES may simply be more knowledgeable and better equipped to perform such activities.

Budgetary responsibilities for career and noncareer members appear more similar than different. Both groups claim responsibility for testifying on budget matters before Congress (74 percent vs. 82 percent), but noncareer

Table 6 SES Members' Involvement in Personnel and Budgeting

Personnel activity	% SES who have responsibility		% SES who have done so in past year ^a	
	Career	Political	Career	Political
Developed ...				
Promotion policies	73.8	61.7*	88.8	84.4
Training policies	80.7	73.9	94.8	81.6***
Equal Opportunity Employment policies	70.9	65.2	79.5	72.7
Recruitment policies	73.2	70.2	84.3	72.2*
Budgeting Activity				
Justify budget to Congress	74.3	82.0	70.9	87.5*
Justify budget to OMB	76.0	82.0	76.1	80.0
Make budgetary decisions	91.6	94.0	na	na

^aThese figures are computed using the number of SES members with this type of responsibility as the denominator. Thus, the percentage reflects the portion of SES members, among those who indicated they have such responsibilities, who have performed the activity within the past year.
 Career-political differences significant at *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
 Source: Survey of Senior Executives

SES were significantly more likely to have done so within the past year (88 percent vs. 71 percent). This is not particularly surprising, considering their greater overall contact with members of Congress. Even though political members appear better connected to OMB, they are no more likely to have responsibility for justifying a budget to OMB or to have done so in the past year (see Table 6). These data make clear that SES members, both career and political, contribute to their organizations' budgetary decision making. Surprisingly, few differences emerge between career and noncareer members in this area even though political appointees, in general, report difficulty with understanding the federal budget process.

Conclusions

This research provides a snapshot of career and noncareer roles and responsibilities within the SES in the late 1990s. Career and political executives bring different perspectives and talents to the federal government, but they share many similar responsibilities while in office. Most SES defend and explain their agency's policies to numerous political actors and participate in the political budgeting process by justifying their budgets before both Congress and OMB and by making budgetary decisions for their organizations. Their involvement in policy matters extends even further as they set priorities for their organizations, initiate policy ideas, recommend changes to existing programs, and choose among various alternatives for achieving policy goals.

Career executives make policy, program, and budgetary decisions for their organizations, as do their political counterparts. Although senior executives report their skills are not being used appropriately (USMSPB 1989), they appear to be just as active in policy-making decisions, as

are their noncareer counterparts in the SES. They also appear slightly more engaged in developing personnel policies for their organizations.

On the other hand, a few significant differences bear repeating. Noncareer SES are substantially more likely to interact with numerous other political actors in Washington than are their career counterparts. Although these data do not permit longitudinal comparisons, this finding corroborates the trend toward fewer political liaison duties for career executives. As Bernstein observed some 40 years ago, one executive emphasized that Congress preferred dealing with career executives rather than political appointees, due to the former's wealth of policy and program experience and knowledge. As he explained: "Congress will listen to the agency head who comes up to testify, but they really want the fellow down the line, especially if the boss is inexperienced, not too adept at testifying, or if something is wrong. What the congressional committee wants is not a new secretary or assistant secretary as witness, but some Bill Smith who has been in the bureau a long time and really knows the program well" (Bernstein 1958, 44–5).

In contrast with theories of "iron triangles" where career executives enjoy intimate relationships with congressional committees, it now appears as if political executives lead in this area, at least as measured here. Whether careerist influence, also reported to be on the decline, is a function of such reduced liaison activities, cannot be directly measured here, the two phenomena seem to be related. As Hecl (1977, 7) explains, "bureaucrats are able to generate their own power through an ability to give or withhold compliance, advice and information." If so, career SES members' power may be noticeably lessened if they have less access and fewer opportunities to bargain and negotiate with other political actors in Washington. Certainly this was part of the Reagan philosophy—if bureaucrats were kept out of the policy making loop by eliminating or severely limiting their contacts with outside actors, they would have less influence. Conversely, some noncareer SES members are appointed particularly because they are well versed in the ways of political bargaining and negotiating.

The findings presented here raise a number of new research questions. Although this research does not allow for interagency comparisons, case studies could determine whether these findings hold true throughout the executive branch. For example, do noncareer SES testify before Congress more often in departments where the president is pushing key priorities? Are they equally likely to testify before authorizing as well as appropriations subcommittees? Addressing these questions will further increase our understanding of these individuals who populate the top echelons of the federal government service.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Annual Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, 1998. The author would like to thank Gregory B. Lewis, David H. Rosenbloom, Robert Maranto, and numerous anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

Notes

1. However, many scholars have argued that the SES has not generally lived up to its expectations. See, for example, Ban and Ingraham 1990; Huddleston 1992; Harper 1992; Ingraham and Ban 1986; Ingraham 1987; Ingraham, Thompson, and Eisenberg 1995.
2. Although the SES was created years after Nixon left office, scholars report that he was suspicious of career members of the "supergrades" and likewise tried to exclude them from policy-making circles (Cole and Caputo 1979).
3. Throughout this paper, political actors are defined as those individuals with whom executives are likely to interact and who can claim some regular involvement in shaping federal policy discussions. Drawing from OPM's (1994) definition of organizational liaison, I include individuals from the executive branch (Office of Management and Budget officials, other White House staff, agency heads, and other political and career executives), the legislative branch (Members of Congress, congressional staff, and congressional committees) and interest groups.
4. One reviewer suggested that different patterns of organizational liaison among career and political executives might be influenced by agency type. Since the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 prohibits political SES members from holding greater than 10 percent of all SES positions, and there are more than 30 departments and agencies that employ SES members, there are insufficient numbers of political executives in the sample to allow controlling for agency type. I did compare political and career executives within the Department of Defense (DoD) and found virtually the same results, with more political executives indicating responsibility for all the organizational liaison activities except one. Fewer political SES than career SES within DoD reported responsibility for meeting with OMB, but these differences were not statistically significant.

References

- Aberbach, Joel D., Robert D. Putnam, and Bert A. Rockman. 1981. *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Aberbach, Joel D., and Bert A. Rockman. 1990. What Has Happened to the U.S. Senior Civil Service? *Brookings Review* 8(4): 35–41.
- Ban, Carolyn, and Patricia W. Ingraham. 1990. Short-Timers: Political Appointee Mobility and Its Impact on Political-Career Relations in the Reagan Administration. *Administration and Society* 22(1): 106–24.
- Bernstein, Marver H. 1958. *The Job of the Federal Executive*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Clinton, John B., and Arthur S. Newburg. 1984. *The Senior Executive Service: A Five-Year Retrospective Review of Its Operating and Conceptual Problems*. Washington, DC: Senior Executive Association.
- Cole, Richard L., and David A. Caputo. 1979. Presidential Control of the Senior Civil Service: Assessing the Strategies of the Nixon Years. *American Political Science Review* 73(2): 399–413.
- Cooper, Terry L., and N. Dale Wright, eds. 1992. *Exemplary Public Administrators: Character and Leadership in Government*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Harper, Kirke. 1992. The Senior Executive Service After One Decade. In *The Promise and Paradox of Civil Service Reform*, edited by Patricia W. Ingraham and David H. Rosenbloom, 267–82. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Heclo, Hugh. 1977. *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Huddleston, Mark W. 1987. *The Government's Managers: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Senior Executive Service*. New York, NY: Priority Press Publications.
- . 1992. To the Threshold of Reform: The Senior Executive Service and America's Search for a Higher Civil Service. In *The Promise and Paradox of Civil Service Reform*, edited by Patricia W. Ingraham and David H. Rosenbloom, 165–97. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Ingraham, Patricia W. 1987. Building Bridges or Burning Them? The President, the Appointees, and the Bureaucracy. *Public Administration Review* 47(5): 425–35.
- Ingraham, Patricia W., and Carolyn Ban. 1986. Models of Public Management: Are They Useful to Federal Managers in the 1980s? *Public Administration Review* 46(2): 152–60.
- Ingraham, Patricia W., James R. Thompson, and Elliot R. Eisenberg. 1995. Political Management Strategies and Political/Career Relationships: Where Are We Now in the Federal Government? *Public Administration Review* 55(3): 263–72.
- Kaufman, Herbert. 1981. *The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Lewis, Eugene. 1980. *Public Entrepreneurship: Toward a Theory of Bureaucratic Political Power*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Light, Paul C. 1987. When Worlds Collide: The Political-Career Nexus. In *The In-and-Outers: Presidential Appointees and Transient Government in Washington*, edited by G. Calvin MacKenzie, 156–73. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1995. *Thickening Government: Federal Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Accountability*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Maranto, Robert. 1993. The Administrative Strategies of Republican Presidents From Eisenhower to Reagan. *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23(4): 683–97.
- Michaels, Judith E. 1997. *The President's Call: Executive Leadership from FDR to George Bush*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- National Academy of Public Administration. 1989. *The Presidential Appointee's Handbook: Supplement for Non-Career Senior Executive Service Appointees*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Public Administration.
- Pfiffner, James P. 1987a. Strangers in a Strange Land: Orienting New Presidential Appointees. In *The In-and-Outers: Presidential Appointees and Transient Government in Washington*, edited by G. Calvin MacKenzie. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1987b. Political Appointees and Career Executives: The Democracy-Bureaucracy Nexus in the Third Century. *Public Administration Review* 47(1): 57–64.
- Riccucci, Norma. 1995. *Unsung Heroes: Executives Making a Difference*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Rockman, Bert A. 1993. Tightening the Reins: The Federal Executive and the Management Philosophy of the Reagan Presidency. *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23(1): 103–14.
- Rourke, Francis. 1984. *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Public Policy*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Sanera, Michael. 1984. Techniques for Managing Policy Change. In *Mandate for Leadership II: Continuing the Conservative Revolution*, edited by Stuart M. Butler, Michael Sanera, and W. Bruce Weinrod. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation.
- Stehr, Steven D. 1997. Top Bureaucrats and the Distribution of Influence in Reagan's Executive Branch. *Public Administration Review* 57(1): 75–82.
- U.S. General Accounting Office. 1992. *Senior Executive Service: Opinions About the Federal Work Environment*. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office.
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. 1989. *The Senior Executive Service: Views of Former Federal Executives*. Washington, DC: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board.
- U.S. Office of Personnel Management. 1994. *Guide to SES Qualifications*. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Personnel Management.
- . 1995. *The Status of the Senior Executive Service: 1994*. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Personnel Management.
- . 1996. *Significant Characteristics of the SES*. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Personnel Management.
- Volcker, Paul A. 1989. Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service. *The Report of the National Commission on the Public Service*. Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Company.