

A new President who wanted a major course-correction away from Trumpism would immediately be faced with a huge problem: Trump will be leaving the apparatus of government in shambles. Much of the government's top echelon – the most experienced and expert public servants — will have been forced out or will have fled the government voluntarily. The lower ranks will be depleted and demoralized. Rebuilding is a longer-term project, but a new President can't afford to put policy on hold in the meantime.

Fortunately, there are some options for moving quickly in the policy sphere. In planning for the post-Trump world, reformers will have a big advantage over exercises like Project 2025: instead of being run by ideologues, the planning process can call upon people who know how government works and who want to make it work better rather than destroying it.

Executive Orders. Trump has used executive orders at an unprecedented level as possible tools. Although this is not best way to run the government in the long run, it does allow a new President to start moving the policy ball very quickly. As we've seen with Trump, executive orders can give a powerful signal of the government's direction and immediately start to shape decisions in the federal government, states, and the private sector. Trump hasn't limited himself to big "all of government" orders. Instead, he's dived down into some of the nitty-gritty of policy.

To avoid entrenching "government by executive order" as a permanent feature of government, I would limit this approach to the first few months of a new Presidency.

During that time, however, it could provide a much-needed jolt of energy and sense of momentum. Executive orders have the advantage that they require relatively small staff, and as we've seen with Trump, they can be written in advance of taking office and fired off when needed.

Coopting the Trump Playbook for Senior Positions. There's been a huge brain drain out of the federal government, which only be worse by the time Trump leaves office. It will take a long time to restore the senior ranks.

But as we've seen from Trump, there are any number of end-runs around normal hiring procedures. There are Special Government Employees like Elon Musk who can be rotated in and out of government and Special Counsels who can be appointed in the Justice Department. (Speaking of Musk, why not replace DOGE with a Government Effectiveness Team, which would work with agencies to find ways for them to do their jobs instead of trying to kneecap them?) Experienced civil servants could be hired by state governments and then "borrowed" by the federal government.

In terms of political appointees, there seem to be numerous options for avoiding the need for Senate confirmation, starting with the Vacancies Reform Act. As Trump has shown, these are subject to all kinds of manipulations that allow the new President enormous flexibility.

Filling in with Consulting Firms. Another way of reengaging both senior and lower-level experienced staff would be to hire them as consultants, or better yet, encourage formation of consulting firms of “public servants in exile.” I’m sure there are all kinds of complications involved in doing this, but these consulting arrangements were used early on by agencies like EPA until they could step up, and they could work now.

Deploying AI. Given the rapid rate of change, it’s hard to know what the capacity of AI is going to be a few years down the road. It does seem plausible that at least AI might be able to take over some of the more routine tasks involved in compiling and analyzing data for regulatory purposes, identifying cases for enforcement action, and drafting routine documents. This could be a force-multiplier for agency staff, who could focus either on higher level decisions or on managing and checking the AI work.

An optimistic view of AI progress might allow much more to be done, but if nothing else AI could be a valuable tool that would allow a depleted agency staff to punch above its weight.

Reorganization. Bureaucratic inertia makes reorganization difficult in normal times, but a new President will be taking over a bureaucracy in crisis. I think there’s a tendency to overestimate the benefits of reorganization and underestimate the costs. But a post-2028 rebuild of the bureaucracy would be an opportunity for some thoughtful reforms, which could include shifting some mergers or shifting of subagencies, streamlining some operations, and reducing some layers of oversight. This needs to be done thoughtfully and should involve participation of affected staff, not just fiat, but it could be quite beneficial.

I know it seems like early days, but some at least some preliminary thinking about these issues needs to begin soon. It’s tempting to make a comparison with Project 2025, but planning for a post-Trump Administration doesn’t need to be another ideological wish-list. Instead, it can draw on a huge amount of expertise and experience from the “federal government in exile” — the experienced experts whom Trump has forced out of the federal government.

