



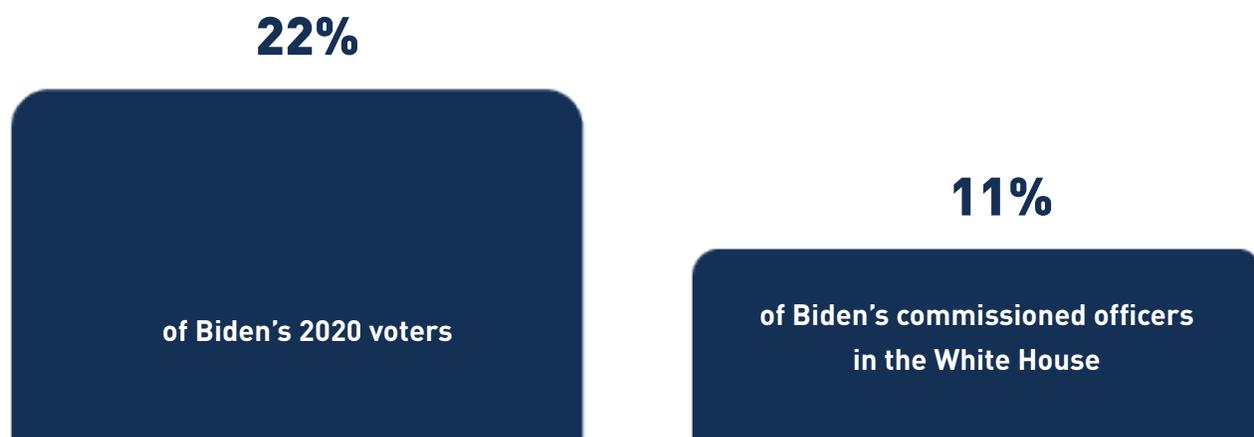
**JOINT CENTER**  
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# Black Representation Among Commissioned Officers in the Biden White House

Karra McCray | September 12, 2022

## BLACK AMERICANS ACCOUNTED FOR...



Black Americans accounted for 22 percent of President Biden's voters in November 2020, but only 11 percent of the commissioned officers (top staff including assistants, deputy assistants, and special assistants to the president) in data recently released by the Biden White House.

Of these top White House staff, Black Americans made up nine percent of those who serve as assistant to the president, eight percent of those who serve as deputy assistant to the president, and 12 percent of those who serve as special assistant to the president.

On July 1, 2022, the Biden administration complied with federal law and released its [2022 Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel](#), which disclosed the names, titles, and salaries of White House Office employees.

*Commissioned officers are the highest-ranking White House staff in statute, budget, and responsibilities.*

Of the 474 employees listed in the report, 139 (or 29 percent) are in one of the top spots — commissioned officers.

Commissioned officers are the highest-ranking White House staff in statute, budget, and responsibilities. Unlike other White House personnel, commissioned officers receive a formal commission certificate from the president, an official photo by the White House office, and an

“Honorable” courtesy title. Commissioned officers are also exempt from the Hatch Act, the federal statute that prevents federal employees from engaging in political activity.

During interviews, White House staff indicated that commissioned officers frequently convene with the president, influence his way of thinking, make recommendations, and advise him on important personnel decisions. Staff in this position may park on White House grounds and take private transportation (a car or driver) to official meetings. On the White House campus, commissioned officers enjoy a personal office and access to perks and resources (e.g., access to the “White House mess” which allows for socialization and engagement with other top staff) that non-commissioned staffers do not receive. Former White House staff indicated other benefits of being a commissioned officer, including greater responsiveness by other government workers (both inside and outside of the White House) to requests from commissioned officers, and a credential that is more valued by outside employers and allows for greater pay, authority, and stature in subsequent positions.

There are three commissioned officer positions: assistant to the president (highest level), deputy assistant to the president (mid-level), and special assistant to the president (lowest level). Federal law and budget restrictions limit the president's ability to appoint more than 25 assistants, 25 deputy assistants, and approximately 70 special assistants.<sup>2</sup> However,

there is some flexibility for each administration to add additional top-level positions if so desired.<sup>3</sup>

We found that Black Americans hold 15 of the 139 commissioned officer positions (11 percent), and that Black commissioned officers are largely concentrated in the lowest level of the three positions — special assistant to the president.

*There are three commissioned officer positions: assistant to the president (highest level), deputy assistant to the president (mid-level), and special assistant to the president (lowest level).*



Susan Rice



Karine Jean-Pierre

Assistant to the president is the top commissioned officer position and accounts for only 22 of the White House positions disclosed in the July 1, 2022 report. Susan Rice (assistant to the president and Domestic Policy advisor) and Karine Jean-Pierre (assistant to the president and press secretary) are the only Black Americans in this position.



Shuwanza Goff



Stacey Grisby

Deputy assistant to the president is the second-highest position and accounts for 26 positions in the White House Office. Two Black Americans are in this position — Shuwanza Goff and Stacey Grisby.

Special assistant to the president is the lowest-ranking commissioned officer position and accounts for 91 positions disclosed in the July 1, 2022 report. There are 11 Black Americans in this position.

Among all White House Office personnel, Black Americans seem to be concentrated in lower-level non-commissioned positions. Of all 474 personnel disclosed in the July 1, 2022 report to Congress, White House staff indicated that 14 percent are Black (which would be between 64-68 Black employees).<sup>4</sup> Of the 139

*Among all White House Office personnel, Black Americans seem to be concentrated in lower-level, non-commissioned positions.*

**BLACK AMERICANS ACCOUNTED FOR...**

of Biden's 2020 voters



of Biden's assistants to the president



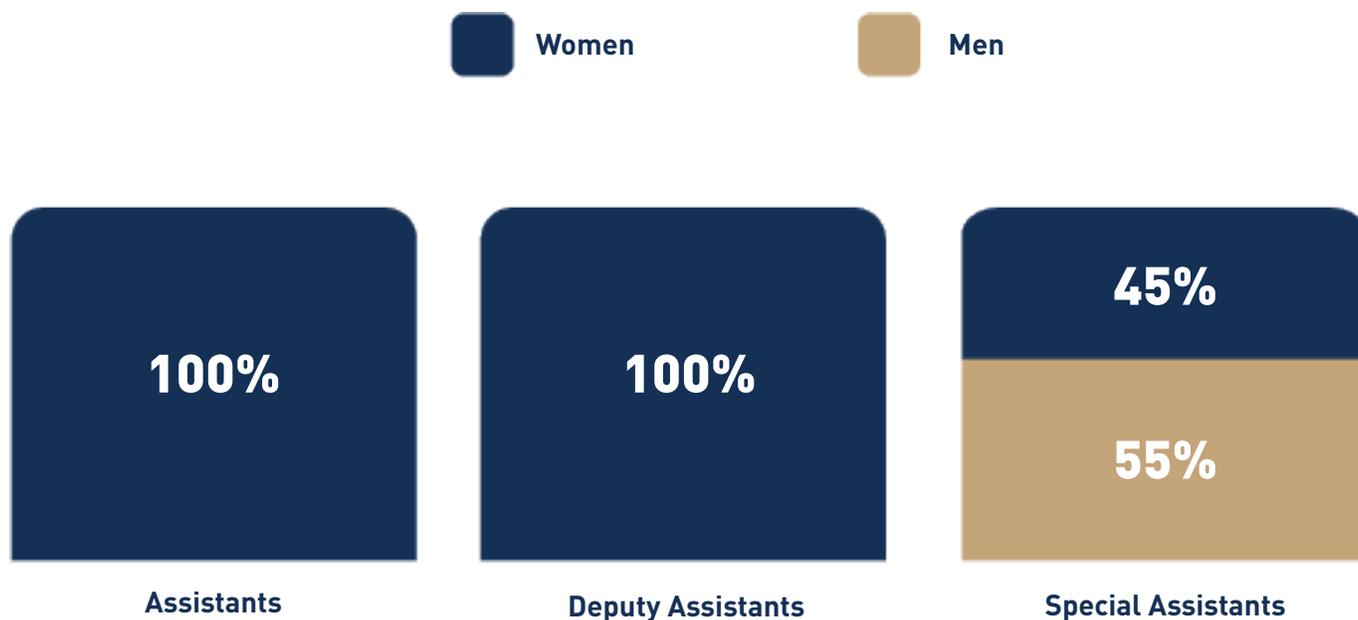
of Biden's deputy assistants to the president



of Biden's special assistants to the president



## BLACK TOP WHITE HOUSE STAFF BY GENDER



commissioned officers in the report, our research revealed that 11 percent (15 employees) are Black. This suggests that the remaining 49-53 Black personnel are among the 335 non-commissioned personnel — and that approximately 15 percent of non-commissioned personnel are Black.

Black women account for all the Black Americans in the top two positions — assistant to the president and deputy assistant to the president. Men account for slightly more than half of the Black special assistant to the president appointees (6 of 11 positions).

## Senior Advisors to the President

According to White House officials, senior advisors to the president who lack “assistant to the president” in their title occupy a rank equivalent to a commissioned officer at the highest level (assistant to the president). These three employees are included in all senior leadership meetings and internal email listservs with assistants to the president and enjoy access to all informal benefits described above. However, not all of these three senior advisors to the president receive a formal commission and Hatch Act exemption.

These three employees are Keisha Lance Bottoms (senior advisor to the president for Public Engagement), Eugene Sperling (White House American Rescue Plan coordinator and senior advisor to the president), and Neera Tanden (staff secretary and senior advisor to the president). Lance Bottoms is the only Black American in this position.



Keisha Lance Bottoms

White House officials would not disclose which of these three senior advisors to the president are formally commissioned officers. If all three received commissions, Black Americans would account for 11 percent (16 out of 142) of the commissioned officers and 12 percent (three out of 25) of the assistants to the president.

In addition to the three senior advisors to the president who lack “assistant to the president” in their titles (Lance Bottoms, Sperling, and Tanden), another three personnel are commissioned officers with titles that include the terms “assis-

tant to the president” and “senior advisor to the president” (Michael C. Donilon, Anita Dunn, and Julie Rodriguez). None of the latter three are Black, and all are accounted for in the data above calculating that nine percent of assistants to the president in the White House Office are Black.

## Recommendations

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It is critical that Black Americans have adequate representation in commissioned officer roles because commissioned officers’ inquiries are prioritized in the administration. Their status grants them the privilege to secure meetings with the president, other White House commissioned officers, and network with senior leadership within the Executive Office of the President and throughout the federal government. After their tenure as a commissioned officer, appointees gain access to roles with more senior titles and better pay within the private and non-profit sectors.

- **Appoint Black Americans to vacant commissioned officer positions.**  
Appointing Black Americans should be a priority when assistant to the president, deputy assistant to the president, and special assistant to the president openings arise.
- **Disclose data on employees in each of the 14 agencies of the Executive Office of the President.**  
Federal law only requires disclosure of White House Office staff, but the current administration can be more transparent by making information about presidential staffers in each federal office publicly available.
- **Collect and report personnel demographics of commissioned officers and other federal employees (and vacancies) on a quarterly basis.**  
With high turnover rates within the Biden administration,<sup>5</sup> frequently publishing more data provides a precise and accurate representation of the administration’s progress on racial diversity in real-time.<sup>6</sup>

## Methodology

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The data in this research includes commissioned officers included in the [2022 Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel](#). Based on the report, we identified 22 assistants, 22 deputy assistants, and 91 special assistant positions. There are four deputy counsels to the president who do not have “deputy assistant to the president” in their titles, but are commissioned officers who have the rank of deputy assistant to the president and are treated as such in this data.

In the 2022 Annual Report, White House officials did not disclose commissioned officers in agencies outside of the White House Office who work on the White House campus (e.g., Office of the Vice President, National Security Council, Office of Management and Budget), as the federal statute only requires reporting of White House Office staff.<sup>7</sup> For example, at least three Black staffers are commissioned officers in the Office of the Vice President: Erin Wilson, Jamal Simmons, and Michael Collins. Shalanda Young, director of the Office of Management and Budget, also identifies as Black. As indicated in the recommendations above, we urge the White House to go beyond the requirements of the federal statute and collect and disclose data (including demographic data) for personnel in all agencies of the Executive Office of the President, so that the public can have a more complete picture of diversity on the White House campus.

We determined whether an assistant is Black by: 1) examining photos on social media accounts, news reports, and biographies from government and institutional websites; 2) looking for racially identifiable information in reports or news coverage on the appointee (e.g., the appointee is the first Black American appointed to the position); and 3) reviewing whether the nominee is affiliated with a traditionally African American organization or institution, including HBCUs, fraternities or sororities, the NAACP, and so forth.

For appointees with publicly available contact information (e.g., email address, LinkedIn account), we contacted them to

## Black Commissioned Officers in the White House (as of July 1, 2022)

POSITION	TITLE	NAME
Assistant	Assistant to the President and Domestic Policy Advisor	Susan E. Rice
Assistant	Assistant to the President and Press Secretary	Karine Jean-Pierre
Deputy Assistant	Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of Legislative Affairs And House Liaison	Shuwanza R. Goff
Deputy Counsel	Deputy Counsel to the President	Stacey Grigsby
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of Oval Office Operations	Ashley N. Williams
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy	Daniel Z. Hornung
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President for National Security Agency Personnel	David E. White Jr.
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs	Gabriel F. Amo Jr.
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President for Climate Policy and Finance	Jahi Wise
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President and Chief Diversity and Inclusion Director	Michael Leach
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President for Budget And Tax Policy	Nadiya F. Beckwith-Stanley
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President for Public Health And Science	Sandra E. Ford
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President and Special Counsel to the President	Tona M. Boyd
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President and Trip Director	Travis D. Dredd
Special Assistant	Special Assistant to the President and Senate Legislative Affairs Liaison	Zephranie N. Buetow

confirm our assumption and asked them to correct information on how they self-identify. We shared our data on commissioned officers with former White House staff for their review and input. We also invited the Office of White House Personnel to correct our data.

To provide corrections to our findings, please send an email with “CORRECTION” in the subject line to [research@jointcenter.org](mailto:research@jointcenter.org).

## Acknowledgments

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We are especially grateful for White House staff and former commissioned officers who cooperated with our requests and provided comprehensive details and insight on the role of commissioned officers and their benefits.

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# References

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- 1 Martha J. Kumar, [“Assistants to the President at 18 Months: White House Turnover Among the Highest-Ranking Staff and Positions.”](#) October 2, 2018.
- 2 [Assistance and services for the President](#), 3 U.S.C. § 105 (2011).
- 3 Martha J. Kumar, [“The Contemporary Presidency Energy or Chaos? Turnover at the Top of President Trump’s White House.”](#) *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 49, (1) (March 2019): 219-236.
- 4 July 2022 videoconference conversations with the author, Joint Center President Spencer Overton, and White House staff.
- 5 Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, [“Tracking Turnover in the Biden Administration.”](#) Brookings, June 2022.
- 6 Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) introduced H.R. 2043 in the House in March 2021 to replace the United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions (commonly referred to as the PLUM book) with an online public directory that would require agencies to publish and update demographic information (including race) on their personnel monthly.
- 7 [Personnel report](#), 3 U.S.C. § 113 (2011).