



**THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT**  
**1997-2021**



**Kinder Institute on  
Constitutional Democracy**  
University of Missouri

*Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power*

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## **REPORT 2021—34**

# **THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT DURING THE OBAMA YEARS**

Heath Brown, *John Jay College, City University of New York*  
*CUNY Graduate Center*

## WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

**The White House Transition Project.** Begun in 1998, the White House Transition Project provides information about individual offices for staff coming into the White House to help streamline the process of transition from one administration to the next. A nonpartisan, nonprofit group, the WHTP brings together political science scholars who study the presidency and White House operations to write analytical pieces on relevant topics about presidential transitions, presidential appointments, and crisis management. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and now the 2021. WHTP coordinates with government agencies and other non-profit groups, e.g., the US National Archives or the Partnership for Public Service. It also consults with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions, worldwide. See the project at <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org>

The White House Transition Project produces a number of materials, including:

- **WHITE HOUSE OFFICE ESSAYS:** Based on interviews with key personnel who have borne these unique responsibilities, including former White House Chiefs of Staff; Staff Secretaries; Counsels; Press Secretaries, etc. , WHTP produces briefing books for each of the critical White House offices. These briefs compile the best practices suggested by those who have carried out the duties of these office. With the permission of the interviewees, interviews are available on the National Archives website page dedicated to this project:
- **\*WHITE HOUSE ORGANIZATION CHARTS.** The charts cover administrations from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama and help new White House staff understand what to expect when they arrive and how their offices changed over time or stayed the same.
- **\*TRANSITION ESSAYS.** These reports cover a number of topics suggested by White House staff, including analyses of the patterns of presidential appointments and the Senate confirmation process, White House and presidential working routine, and the patterns of presidential travel and crisis management. It also maintains ongoing reports on the patterns of interactions with reporters and the press in general as well as White House staffing.
- **\*INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT.** The WHTP consults with international governments and groups interested in transitions in their governments. In 2017 in conjunction with the Baker Institute, the WHTP hosted a conference with emerging Latin American leaders and in 2018 cosponsored a government transitions conference with the National Democratic Institute held in November 2018 in Montreal, Canada .

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**The Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy.** A central element of the University of Missouri's main campus in Columbia, Missouri, the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy prepares students for lives of thoughtful and engaged citizenship by equipping them with knowledge of the ideas and events that have shaped our nation's history.

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Gerald Ford created the Office of Public Liaison by executive action in 1974. In 2009, newly elected President Barack Obama renamed it the Office of Public Engagement. While the newly named office maintained much of its original mission, the president added the goal of “getting information from the American people outside of the Washington beltway” through public events and on-line activities.<sup>1</sup> The Office of Public Engagement was to be the “front door” to the White House for Americans to participate in the work of the president.

### LESSONS LEARNED

- Compared with previous administrations, President Barack Obama expanded the size of the Office of Public Engagement (OPE) by increasing the size of the staff and number of units contained in the office.
- President Obama chose one of his closest advisers, Valerie Jarrett, to run the OPE. This expanded the influence of the office with the administration and in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “President Obama Launches Office of Public Engagement,” May 11, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-obama-launches-office-public-engagement>.

operations of the White House, as Jarrett had access to the president to a greater extent than most of her predecessors who headed the Office of Public Liaison.

- Compared with her predecessors, Jarrett brought to the OPE a different set of skills and relationships. Her background in business meant strong ties to the business community, but her limited background in Washington politics, especially with Capitol Hill, made other aspects of the job more difficult.
- The Obama OPE capitalized on advances in digital technology, incorporating blogging, social media, and other new ways to connect to external audiences. While difficult to measure the impact of these innovations, each defined the approach of this office.
- The growth in size and capacity of the OPE occurred at the same time as the office took on a larger role in White House policy-making, exemplified by the push for stricter gun control laws in 2015 and 2016.
- Despite growing size and expanding role in policy, the OPE under President Obama struggled at times with the limited existing Washington relationships of its leader, the difficulty of implementing an expanded and varied mission, and ongoing difficulties of pushing a legislative agenda from the White House.
- The history of the Obama OPE shows that influence in the White House does not always equal policy success outside of the White House.



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### INTRODUCTION

The Obama administration used the Office of Public Liaison, renamed the Office of Public Engagement (OPE), in many of the same ways as his predecessors: to interact with constituencies outside of government, including trade associations, interest groups, and citizen groups. However, the president's strict stance on lobbying and ethics, the emerging role of technology, and the significance of OPE staffing resulted in bold new activities added to the portfolio of OPE. The aim of this brief is to highlight these trends and to summarize the evolution of the OPE from 2009 to 2016.

### ROLE OF THE OPE

The Office of Public Liaison began in the Nixon administration, an evolution in the organization of the White House that mirrored the rising number and influence of organized groups in U.S. politics. Joseph Pika's seminal work on the OPL groups its work under six broad activities:

1. group representatives / advocates / case workers
2. ambassadors
3. intelligence gathering / interpreters

4. fire-fighters
5. mobilizing support / building coalitions
6. public education<sup>1</sup>

The most dramatic change during the Obama administration was the addition of a seventh: policy leadership.

While previous administrations had integrated the office with policy efforts focused elsewhere in the White House, including the push for healthcare reform in the Bill Clinton administration and tax cuts in the George W. Bush administration, OPL functioned typically as a supporting player. Pika wrote: “OPL staff members have seldom had the standing to shape policy.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Obama administration, things changed dramatically, and staffing decisions elevated the standing of the office tremendously. In several cases, presidential policy priorities were shifted into the OPE, and the office took leadership in shepherding them through the policy process. While the success of these policy initiatives varied, the prominence of this new category of activity has been an innovation of the Obama White House.

## **INTEREST GROUPS, LOBBYISTS, AND OBAMA’S OFFICE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

Campaign promises made by then-candidate Barack Obama shaped the direction of the OPE. One of the first decisions the Obama administration made after the inauguration drew on the strong stance on lobbyists that it had taken during the transition phase. Obama’s transition team required team members to sign ethics agreements and forbade lobbyists from helping to plan any agency transition in which it had client business. Once the transition ended, the president quickly announced a ban on lobbyists serving in his administration, enacted a gift ban from lobbyists, and limited the revolving door between lobbying and government.<sup>3</sup> Though exceptions were made, the public message sent by the Obama administration was clear: lobbyists were not welcome.

These steps reflected the new president’s campaign promises and beliefs about the business of influence in Washington, both of which shaped his vision for the OPE. Just a few months later, the president announced: “The Office of Public Liaison is now the Office of Public Engagement. OPE, along with the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, will serve as the front door to the White House through which ordinary Americans can participate and inform the work of the President.” This change in office name reflected the president’s public stance toward lobbyists, shifting the focus of OPE to engaging the public, but also heightening the prominence of the office in the White House. During the previous administration, the office was subsumed under an umbrella group with Intergovernmental Affairs and Political Affairs but seemed to take a diminished role in the Bush administration. For Obama, the newly

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Pika, “The Office of Public Liaison,” 2017, White House Transition Project, [http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WHTP2017-34\\_Public\\_Liaison.pdf](http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WHTP2017-34_Public_Liaison.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Executive Order 13490—Ethics Commitments by Executive Branch Personnel,” January 21, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/ethics-commitments-executive-branch-personnel>.



named office demonstrated his commitment to citizen participation, but did not mean that interest groups would all lose access to the White House. Interest groups, including new constituencies, continued to play a major part in the White House, often through the refashioned OPE.

One day-to-day impact of the ethics rules was a practice that emerged of holding informal meetings with outside groups at the nearby Caribou Coffee. Aiming to circumvent new rules that required all visitors to the White House to be logged and later disseminated to the public on the White House website, the *New York Times* reported that hundreds of meetings with lobbyists, many likely coordinated by OPE, were scheduled for the local coffee shop west of the White House. These did not need to be logged, since they did not occur at the White House. While there was little evidence of nefarious purposes, the practice was mocked by newspapers and lobbyists, as either hypocritical or a waste of time.<sup>4</sup>

## LEADERSHIP OF OPE IN THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Unlike the previous two administrations, leadership of OPE remained consistent and prominent. In contrast to the four different individuals who oversaw the office for Bill Clinton (Mary Beth Cahill, Minyon Moore, Maria Echaveste, and Alexis Herman) and George W. Bush (Julie Cram, Rhonda Keenum, Lezlee Westine, and Ruben Barrales), Valerie Jarrett was in charge for all eight years of the Obama administration. This stability of leadership, unusual for the OPE and also for the White House in general, seems to be associated with the rising prominence of the office, as was the choice of Jarrett.

Unlike her predecessors, Jarrett was a long-standing Obama loyalist, a professional friend of the first lady from Chicago, and a close family associate by the time of the campaign. This is not to say that previous directors of the office were minor players in the White House or unfriendly with the president at the time, but rather that Jarrett was considered by many as unparalleled in her importance. Also, Jarrett's position in the informal Obama inner circle cannot be disentangled from the role of the OPE in the Obama administration. It is reasonable to expect that if Jarrett had been named to run any other office in the White House, she would have been just as powerful and that office would have grown in prominence.

However, unlike many of her predecessors, such as Karl Rove, Jarrett's background in business, rather than Washington politics, shaped how she carried out the functions of the job. Jarrett was widely praised for much of her work in OPE, especially her strong links to the business community. For example, according to the *New York Times*, President Obama credited Jarrett with helping to navigate the financial crisis that dominated the early days of his administration.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Jarrett used the OPE's traditional role in connecting the White House to outside constituency groups. The president mentioned Jarrett's "contacts with CEOs around the country" as useful in his deliberations over the proper policy response to the crisis. On the contrary, Jarrett's weaker connections to Washington political circles presented problems. She was criticized for encouraging the president to travel to Europe to lobby for Chicago as the site of the Olympics.<sup>6</sup> The *New York Times* reported that it was Jarrett

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<sup>4</sup> See Eric Lichtblau, "Across from White House, Coffee with Lobbyists," *New York Times*, June 24, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/25/us/politics/25caribou.html? r=0>.

<sup>5</sup> See Robert Draper, "The Ultimate Obama Insider," *New York Times*, July 21, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/magazine/26jarrett-t.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

who persuaded the president to make the unsuccessful trip to Copenhagen during his first year in office, advice that may have failed to consider how the trip, especially if it went badly, would harm the president.<sup>7</sup>

A second challenge faced by the White House was coordination across offices. With Jarrett's expanded influence came the need to funnel many non-OPE activities through her. This may have served to coordinate the White House and avoid duplicative work. On the contrary, some interest groups contended that this slowed the process. For example, one interest group leader contended that potential meetings with those in the Office of Legislative Affairs had to be checked with Jarrett, a new and apparently unwelcome practice.<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to underestimate Jarrett's importance in the Obama White House and leadership in OPE, but she was not alone. Joining Jarrett were other prominent Obama advisers, including individuals who nominally held the title of director of OPE (Jarrett oversaw OPE as well as the Office of Intergovernmental Relations). At the top of OPE, Christina Tchen was the first director, and Michael Strautmanis served as Jarrett's chief of staff. In its earlier days, other OPE staff were designated for public-private partnerships, logistics and scheduling, and outreach with the disability community.<sup>9</sup> At the onset of his administration, President Obama also revived the Council on Women and Girls, which the previous administration had discontinued, and placed it under Jarrett's leadership at OPE.

## STAFFING OF THE OPE

The growing prominence of the OPE in the Obama administration can be observed in the staffing of the office. While precise estimates are hard to come by (and unconfirmed estimates for the Office of Public Liaison have reached as high as 50 for past presidents), especially for early years of the OPL in the 1970s and 1980s, until 2009 the office rarely approached a staff of 20 (see Figure 1). Based on counts derived from White House staff phone numbers, one can see that the number of OPL staff was between 13 and 15 for much of the Reagan years, grew slightly in the Clinton White House to around 17 or 18, dipped during the George W. Bush years, but expanded considerably after 2009.

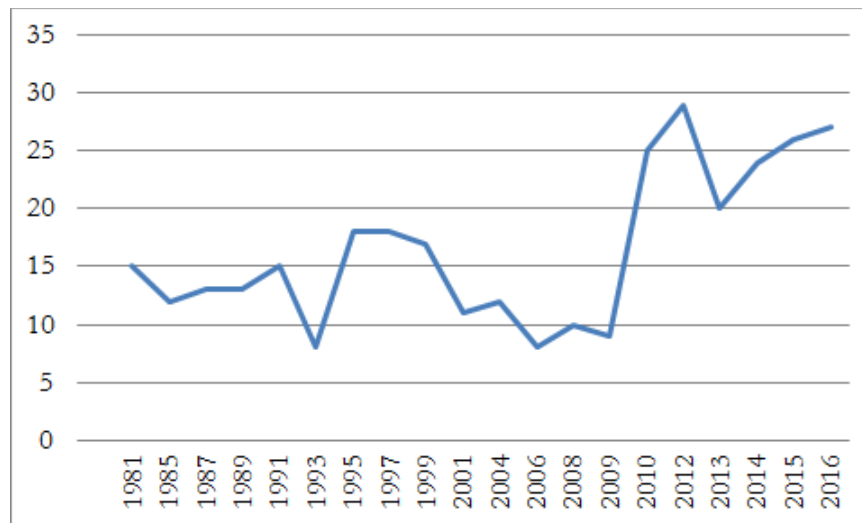
By the Obama administration, the OPE saw substantial growth in staff size and therefore capacity. From 2009 to 2016, the OPE staff rested around 25 or 26, a great expansion in the capacity of what the office could accomplish. Of course, bigger does not always mean more influential or effective. The increased capacity of the Obama OPE did not always result in stronger relationships with interest groups or consistent policy victories credited to the office. This may be the case when those in the office—especially in leadership positions—are new to Washington and lack the long-standing connections and relationships to ease difficult negotiations. A larger office may also mean a mission spread across more issues, as was the case during the Obama administration when several other offices were subsumed under OPE.

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<sup>7</sup> See Peter Baker and Jeff Zeleny, "For Obama, an Unsuccessful Campaign," *New York Times*, October 2, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/03/sports/03obama.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/03/sports/03obama.html?_r=0).

<sup>8</sup> Background interview, April 2016.

<sup>9</sup> See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "President Obama Launches Office of Public Engagement," May 11, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-obama-launches-office-public-engagement>.

**Figure 1. Estimate of OPE Staff Size Overtime**

As previous administration's had done, specific OPE staffers were charged with overseeing outreach to certain communities. By the end of the Obama administration, there were separate OPE staffers overseeing sports teams and athletes; American Indian groups; the Jewish community; veterans; African Americans; labor; the entertainment industry; the faith-based community; youth; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Latinos; the LGBT community, and the business community.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, and indicative of the policy focus of the Obama OPE, one staffer was designated to pursue outreach related to the administration's signature policy victory. In 2016, Beth Evans held the position of associate director of OPE with responsibilities for outreach on the Affordable Care Act.

Finally, toward its closing days in office, the Obama OPE responded to emerging issues and added new positions as well, including a Muslim Community Liaison in 2016 as a response to rising tensions faced by Muslim Americans.<sup>11</sup>

## TACTICS AND STRATEGIES OF THE OPE

From 2009 to 2016, the OPE used many of the same tactics of earlier offices, including convening constituent groups on important issues at the White House for summits, holding small meetings with constituent groups, and participating in external events, often as invited speakers. This reflects a continuation of accepted practice of this office as the White House center of outreach to organized groups.

As important, we also see the OPE at the forefront of White House efforts to integrate digital technologies. In doing so, the OPE took advantage of the unmediated connections that

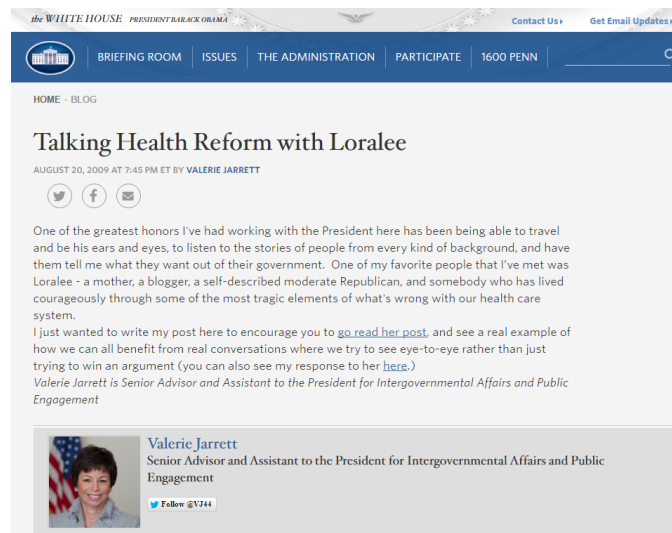
<sup>10</sup> See The White House, "Engage and Connect: About the Office of Public Engagement," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/engage/office>.

<sup>11</sup> See Antonia Blumberg, "Meet the White House's New Muslim American Community Liaison," *Huffington Post*, May 26, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-house-muslim-community-liaison-zaki-barzinji\\_us\\_57462d15e4b03ede4413d236?9ul0plg2r5zqcsemi](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-house-muslim-community-liaison-zaki-barzinji_us_57462d15e4b03ede4413d236?9ul0plg2r5zqcsemi).

the president could maintain with citizens and voters. As with the changing strategies of the White House Office of Communications, OPE could pursue its traditional role of rallying support for the president, but with a diminished need to work with established groups. Blogging, tweeting, and live streaming all opened the door to the White House for those far from Washington and those without interest group representation. This shift in OPE strategy created opportunities but also new challenges.

For example, Valerie Jarrett maintained a blog (see Figure 2). She used this blog to share comments she had delivered at events, promote days of historical significance, and mobilize support for policy. In the past, these activities might have been directed through relevant interest groups, which would then have shared the communications with constituents. Jarrett's blog allowed for more direct communications. Jarrett's first blog post was on August 20, 2009, concerning healthcare reform. On June 14, 2010, another post was titled "Senior Advisor Valerie Jarrett Addressed the National Association of Women Business Owners at the 2010 Women's Business Conference." Another illustrative post a year later was titled "Increasing College Graduation Rates in the District of Columbia."

**Figure 2. Example of OPE Blog Post**



Blogging shows how OPE adapted traditional activities from the past to the new digitally enhanced White House of the later 2000s. Other digital tactics were also incorporated into the approach taken by the Obama OPE. For example, "electronic town halls" were coordinated by OPE with the president; in one case, nearly 100,000 individuals participated online, submitted more than 100,000 questions, and cast nearly 2 million virtual votes.<sup>12</sup>

As the OPE continued to adapt to the evolving digital environment, more tools were incorporated into their outreach strategy, including live Twitter sessions and online streaming events. As the OPE continued to open the White House to a wider audience, some commentators cautioned against a "democracy bubble" that could result from rising citizen expectations that are often unmet. Thomas Bryer suggests that in order to mitigate this

<sup>12</sup> Thomas A. Bryer, "Online Public Engagement in the Obama Administration: Building a Democracy Bubble?" *Policy & Internet* 3, no. 4 (December 2011): 1-22.

situation, the OPE and White House need to “ensure that citizen expectations are managed”; “educate citizens about how to effectively communicate their interests”; and “be explicit about under what conditions, and with which policy issues, citizens are given power.”<sup>13</sup>

These concerns are not new to the OPE and not unique to the advent of digital technologies. Pika remarked on different strategies to deal with balancing the need to solicit interest group support for policy with the development of policy. Anne Wexler’s office during the Carter administration kept staff and different facets of policy development and support separate, while Karl Rove initiated a more coordinated strategy within the George W. Bush administration. The OPE in the Obama administration seems to have pursued a much more coordinated organizational approach to address this dilemma.

## **CASE STUDY OF THE OPE IN ACTION: THE ONGOING RESPONSE TO GUN VIOLENCE**

All White House offices work to meet the goals of the president, including policy and legislative objectives. In previous administrations, the Office of Public Liaison would be called upon to rally support for a policy priority. During the Obama administration, there are several cases of the OPE moving beyond supporting player to the center of executing White House policy strategy.

Tragically, President Obama had to confront the aftermath of mass shootings 14 different times while in office. The mass murder of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2013 resulted in heightened interest in a coordinated White House policy response. Vice President Joe Biden initially took up the cause and led the administration’s response from his office at the Old Executive Office Building.

According to media coverage: “In his search for progress after Newtown, Biden and his staff famously met with, as he put it, ‘every possible stakeholder in this debate; 229 separate groups,’ in just a few months.”<sup>14</sup> With the vice president in the lead, the OPE provided support for his outreach effort that resulted in an agenda focused on expanding background checks.

Biden’s strategy ultimately resulted in no major policy change in Congress. However, just three years later, after the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, in 2016, it was Jarrett, not Biden, who was leading the much more aggressive policy plan on guns. According to reporting, Jarrett initially used the OPE’s traditional role of convening interested parties by inviting gun industry leaders and organized gun rights advocates to the White House. When the executive opted not to attend the meeting, “Jarrett decided to mobilize nearly 200,000 supporters behind a new assault weapons ban,” largely opposed by pro-gun advocates. Jarrett held a conference call that was broadcast on YouTube at which she said: “Please keep making your voices heard. Raise them over and over and over and over and over again.”<sup>15</sup>

Jarrett used the historic convening power of the OPE, the power of digital technologies to reach new audiences, and her own influence to lead the charge on this round of the gun policy debate. Illustrative of this, *Politico* reported that “as the audience waited for Biden to come to the podium, Jarrett was in the back of the room, deep in conversation, as her top

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See Sarah Wheaton, “Valerie Jarrett’s War on Guns,” *Politico*, June 22, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/valerie-jarrett-guns-224626#ixzz4CLFDu8r0>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

aides—Paulette Aniskoff, Bess Evans and Yohannes Abraham—circulated through the crowd. It was those aides, in Jarrett’s Office of Public Engagement, who have gradually taken on the bulk of the gun portfolio over the past three years, even as they continue to collaborate with Biden’s staff.”<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the rising profile of the OPE in the White House and its unusually prominent role in policy, the gun violence issue demonstrates the difficulty of pushing policy change from within the White House. OPE may have taken over leadership on the push for more stringent gun control legislation, but it could take credit for few major legislative victories.

## CONCLUSION

It is hard to imagine previous OPLs with the internal White House power to take the lead on an issue as important as gun control. Jarrett’s influence with the president is one explanation for this newly powerful role, but not the only explanation. A second explanation is that under President Obama, the OPE’s growing staff size gave it the capacity to pursue a wider range of tactics and strategies that understaffed OPLs of the past were not permitted. The changing ecosystem of organized interests, including newly significant constituencies, such as the LGBT community, Muslim Americans, and even professional athletes, is a third explanation. A fourth explanation is the significance of technology. Without digital technologies, President Obama’s vision for his OPE as the “front door” to the White House could not be realized. YouTube, Twitter, and the OPE website all permitted the Obama OPE to reach out to the citizenry without mediation. Digital technologies could be used to reach unorganized constituencies, lacking in organized representation in Washington, in a way that would have been much more difficult in the past.

Nevertheless, the Obama OPE and Valerie Jarrett were not without critics and not always effective. The cases of the president’s trip to Europe to lobby for the Olympics and the failure to push through gun control legislation demonstrate the limitations of the office. Jarrett brought novel skills and existing relationships to the OPE, but did not possess the long-standing relationships that most leaders of the office possess. As a result, while the Obama OPE grew in relative influence, it did not necessarily result in numerous policy successes.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.