



David Dayen

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WHEN PRESIDENT OBAMA announced his support last week for a Federal Communications Commission plan to open the market for cable set-top boxes — a big win for consumers, but also [for Google](#) — the cable and telecommunications giants who used to have a near-stranglehold on tech policy were furious. AT&T chief lobbyist Jim Cicconi [lashed out](#) at what he called White House intervention on behalf of “the Google proposal.”

He’s hardly the first to suggest that the Obama administration has become too close to the Silicon Valley juggernaut.

Over the past seven years, Google has created a remarkable partnership with the Obama White House, providing expertise, services, advice, and personnel for vital government projects.

Precisely how much influence this buys Google isn’t always clear. But consider that over in the European Union, Google is now facing [two major antitrust charges](#) for abusing its dominance in mobile operating systems and search. By contrast, in the U.S., a strong case to sanction Google was quashed by a presidentially appointed commission.

It’s a relationship that bears watching. “Americans know surprisingly little about what Google wants and gets from our government,” said Anne Weismann, executive director of [Campaign for Accountability](#), a nonprofit watchdog organization. Seeking to change that, Weismann’s group is spearheading a data transparency project about Google’s interactions in Washington.

The Intercept teamed up with Campaign for Accountability to present two revealing data sets from that forthcoming project: one on the number of White House meetings attended by Google representatives, and the second on the revolving door between Google and the government.

As the interactive charts accompanying this article show, Google representatives attended White House meetings more than once a week, on average, from the beginning of Obama’s presidency through October 2015. Nearly 250 people have

shuttled from government service to Google employment or vice versa over the course of his administration.

Photo: Paul Morigi/Getty Images

No other public company approaches this degree of intimacy with government. According to an analysis of White House data, the Google lobbyist with the most White House visits, Johanna Shelton, visited 128 times, far more often than lead representatives of the other top-lobbying companies — and more than twice as often, for instance, as Microsoft’s Fred Humphries or Comcast’s David Cohen. (The accompanying chart reflects 94 Shelton visits; it excludes large gatherings such as state dinners and White House tours.)

The information, Weismann said, “will help the public learn more about the company’s influence on our government, our policies, and our lives.”

Asked to respond, Google spokesperson Riva Litman referred *The Intercept* to a [blog post](#) written when the *Wall Street Journal* [raised similar questions](#) a year ago. In that post, Google said the meetings covered a host of topics, including patent reform, STEM education, internet censorship, cloud computing, trade and investment, and smart contact lenses. The company also claimed to have counted similar numbers of visits to the White House by Microsoft and Comcast — but it did not explain its methodology for parsing the data.

Google’s dramatic rise as a lobbying force has not gone unnoticed. The company paid almost no attention to the Washington influence game prior to 2007, but [ramped up steeply thereafter](#). It [spent \\$16.7 million](#) in lobbying in 2015, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, and has been at or near the top of public companies in lobbying expenses since 2012.

But direct expenditures on lobbying represent only one part of the larger influence-peddling game. Google’s lobbying strategy also includes throwing [lavish D.C. parties](#); making [grants to trade groups, advocacy organizations, and think tanks](#); offering [free services and training](#) to campaigns, congressional offices, and journalists; and [using academics as validators](#) for the company’s public policy positions. Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Alphabet, Google’s parent company, was an enthusiastic supporter of both of Obama’s presidential campaigns and has been a major Democratic donor.

For its part, the Obama administration — attempting to project a brand of innovative, post-partisan problem-solving of issues that have bedeviled government for decades — has welcomed and even come to depend upon its association with one of America’s largest tech companies.

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GOOGLE DOESN'T JUST lobby the White House for favors, but collab officials, effectively serving as a sort of corporate extension of government operations in the digital era.

In just the past few years, Google has provided diplomatic assistance to the administration through [expanding internet access in Cuba](#); collaborated with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to [bring Google Fiber into public housing](#); used Google resources to [monitor droughts](#) in real time; and even [captured 360-degree views](#) of White House interiors.

But perhaps most salient here is the fact that modern life requires so much information technology support that a sprawling operation like the White House has turned to tech companies — often in the form of ex-Google employees — when faced with pressing IT needs.

Practically every part of the government makes available some form of technology, whether it's the public-facing website for a federal agency, a digital mechanism for people to access benefits, or a new communications tool for espionage or war.

Somebody has to build and manage those projects, and Silicon Valley firms have the expertise needed to do that. White House officials have publicly asked Silicon Valley for aid in [stopping terrorists](#) from recruiting via social media, [securing the internet of things](#), [thwarting cyberattacks](#), [modernizing the Defense Department](#), and generally [updating all their technology](#). We can reasonably expect yet more things are being asked for behind closed doors.

The disastrous launch of HealthCare.gov in October 2013 is the most obvious example. Within weeks of the site going live, Chief Technology Officer Todd Park, his top deputy Nicole Wong (a former Google deputy general counsel), and White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough held meetings with Google personnel.

 toddparker

Photo: Philips Communications/Flickr

In *Time* magazine, Steven Brill [detailed one of those meetings](#), between Park and Gabriel Burt, the chief technology officer at Eric Schmidt's Civis Analytics. Civis was already working on Obamacare as a vendor for Enroll America, a nonprofit tasked with getting people subscribed on the insurance exchanges. Civis used reams of data to target communities with high levels of uninsured Americans so Enroll America could contact them. But now the site where they were supposed to sign up wasn't working. So the White House turned to Civis for help with that as well.

Eventually, Mikey Dickerson, a site-reliability engineer with Google who previously worked on the Obama campaign, got [hired to fix the site](#). Burt and Dickerson worked together to “form a rescue squad” for HealthCare.gov, according to *Time*. And most of the recruits came from Google. Later, Dickerson [led the U.S. Digital Service](#), a new agency whose mission was to fix other technology problems in the federal government. Ex-Google staffers were prevalent there as well. Dickerson attended nine White House meetings with Google personnel while working for the government between 2013 and 2014.

Meetings between Google and the White House, viewed in this context, sometimes function like calls to the IT Help Desk. Only instead of working for the same company, the government is supposed to be regulating Google as a private business, not continually asking it for favors.

Much of this collaboration could be considered public-minded — it’s hard to argue with the idea that the government should seek outside technical help when it requires it. And there’s no evidence of a quid pro quo. But this arrangement doesn’t have to result in outright corruption to be troubling.

The obvious question that arises is: Can government do its job with respect to regulating Google in the public interest if it owes the company such a debt of gratitude?

Google doesn’t think its activities present an antitrust problem. It doesn’t feel constrained from holding incredible amounts of data. But should Google be in a position to make that determination itself? How much influence is too much influence?

Another potential conflict arises from the enormous amount of data that Google and the government each have stored on American citizens. Google recently acknowledged having mined the [data of student users](#) of its education apps, and has been [accused repeatedly](#) of [violating user privacy](#) in other contexts. An overly close partnership risks Google putting its data in the government’s hands or gaining access to what the government has collected.

When the federal government and a private company share the same worldview, get the same insights from the same groups of people, the policy drift can occur with nobody explicitly choosing the direction. It just seems like the right thing to do.

And there is no doubt that Google’s rise in Washington has coincided with public policy that is friendlier to the company.

Most notably, Google has faced questions for years about exercising its market power to squash rivals, infringing on its users’ privacy rights, favoring its own

business affiliates in search results, and using patent law to create barriers to competition. Even Republican senators like Orrin Hatch have [called out Google](#) for its practices.

In 2012, staff at the Federal Trade Commission recommended filing antitrust charges after determining that Google was engaging in anti-competitive tactics and abusing its monopoly. A staff report that was [later leaked](#) said Google's conduct "has resulted — and will result — in real harm to consumers and to innovation in the online search and advertising markets."

The [Wall Street Journal](#) noted that Google's White House visits increased right around that time. And in 2013, the presidentially appointed commissioners of the FTC overrode their staff, voting unanimously not to file any charges.

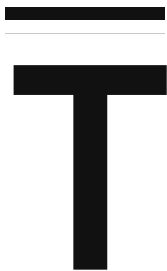
Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, said the administration "has been a huge help" to Google both by protecting it from attempts to limit its market power and by blocking privacy legislation. "Google has been able to thwart regulatory scrutiny in terms of anti-competitive practices, and has played a key role in ensuring that the United States doesn't protect at all the privacy of its citizens and its consumers," Chester said.

At a [congressional hearing](#) earlier this month, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, citing the possibility of consumer harm, called on the FTC to reconsider the kind of antitrust charges against Google recently filed in Europe.

But Obama has argued that European regulators are being too aggressive toward Google out of a desire to protect companies that aren't as capable. "In defense of Google and Facebook, sometimes the European response here is more commercially driven than anything else," [he told Re/code](#) in February. "We have owned the internet. Our companies have created it, expanded it, perfected it, in ways they can't compete."



On the left, you will find the names of White House officials who met with Google staff; on the right, the names of Google staff who met with White House officials. Hover over their names to see their titles and the number of meetings they attended. Hover over each meeting to find out who else was present. Source: Campaign for Accountability; Data Visualization: Accurat.it



THE ACCOMPANYING VISUALIZATION documents White House meetings involving employees from Google, Eric Schmidt's investment vehicle Tomorrow Ventures, and Civis Analytics, a company whose [sole investor](#) is Schmidt.

Between January 2009 and October 2015, Google staffers gathered at the White House on 427 separate occasions. All told, 182 White House employees and 169 Google employees attended the meetings, with participation from almost every domestic policy and national security player in the West Wing.

The frequency of the meetings has increased practically every year, from 32 in 2009 to 97 in 2014. In the first 10 months of 2015, which is as far as the study goes, there were 85 Google meetings.

The most frequent visitor is Johanna Shelton, one of Google's top lobbyists in Washington — officially its director of public policy. Shelton attended meetings at the White House on 94 different occasions.

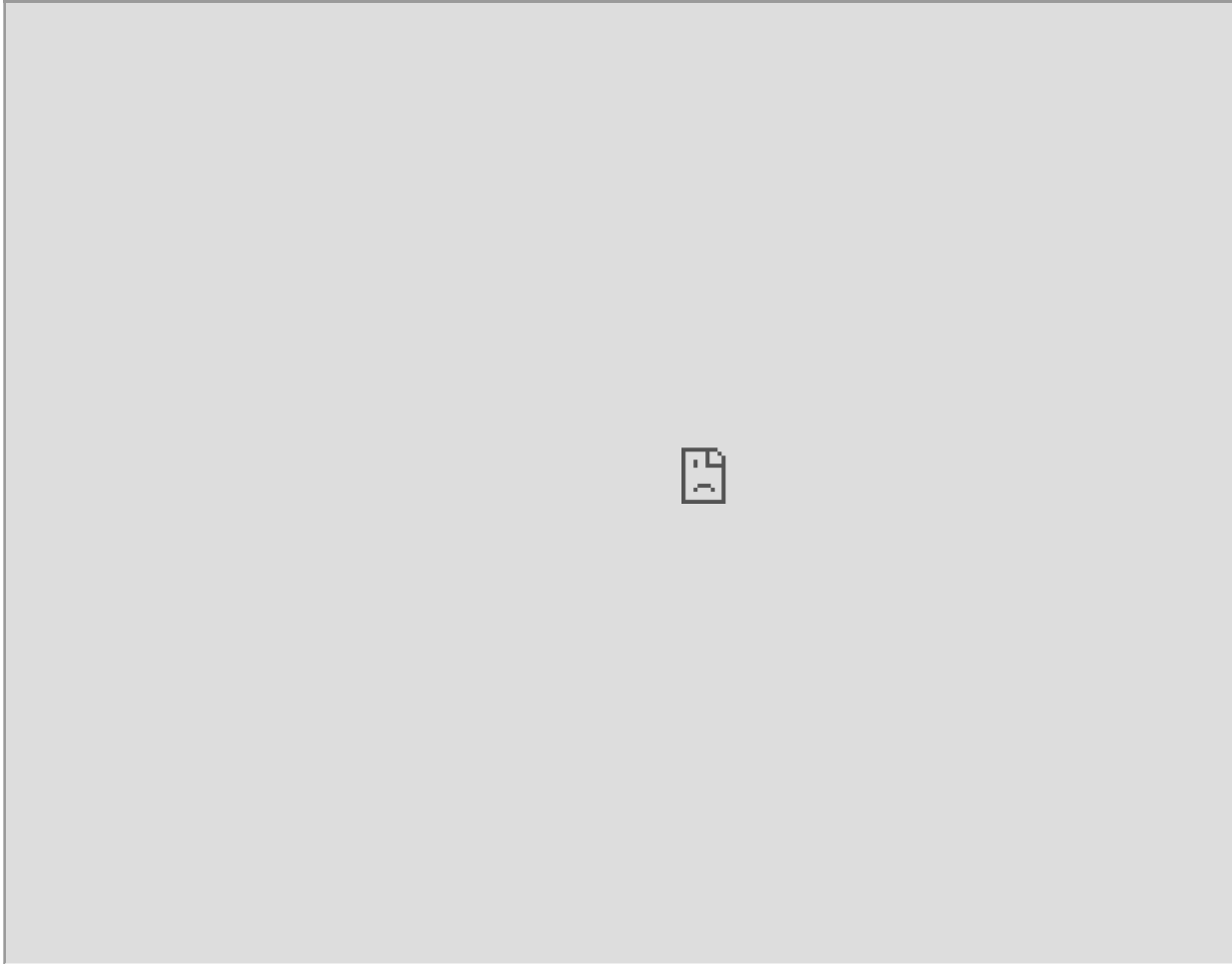
The most Google-visited White House official is Todd Park, the U.S. chief technology officer from 2012 to 2014. In that short period, Park met with Google officials at the White House 22 times. Park's replacement, current Chief Technology Officer Megan Smith, was a [former Google vice president](#). She had five White House meetings as a Google representative, then 10 Google meetings as a White House representative.

The comprehensiveness of Google's outreach jumps out from the data. You would expect some contact between Google and top technology policymakers like Park, Smith, Aneesh Chopra, Susan Crawford, and Vivek Kundra. But Google's presence as an economic force and a communications tool gives the company an interest in virtually every aspect of public policy.

Since 2009, Google has met with all three of Obama's directors of the National Economic Council (Larry Summers, Gene Sperling, and Jeffrey Zients), one chair of the Council of Economic Advisers (Austan Goolsbee), and another official who would become CEA chair (Jason Furman, who was then deputy director of the NEC).

Company employees met with four Obama chiefs of staff (Rahm Emanuel, William Daley, Jack Lew, and Denis McDonough). Google also huddled with national security personnel like Michael McFaul (then at the NSC, later U.S. ambassador to Russia) and Tony Blinken (deputy national security adviser). Employees met with Heather Zichal, deputy assistant for energy and climate change, and White House science adviser John Holdren. They met with close counselors to the president like Pete Rouse, Valerie Jarrett, John Podesta, and Dan Pfeiffer. They met with then-communications director Jennifer Palmieri. And they met with the president of the United States 21 separate times — five times in the first term and 16 times in the first two-plus years of the second term. Even Jill Biden and Michelle Obama have taken meetings with Google employees.

The visitor logs only show the individuals in attendance at the meetings, not what the meetings were about. But it's possible to make some educated guesses. The presence of Johanna Shelton at 94 meetings suggests that a significant chunk were devoted to lobbying on various Google priorities. But there are hundreds of other meetings in the logs that point to more of a consulting role.



Each line represents an individual's move between Google and U.S. government agencies, congressional staff, or federal-level political campaigns. You can filter by direction to see only transfers from or to Google; by sub-organization; and by year. To reset the graphic, click anywhere that's not highlighted. Source: Campaign for Accountability; Data Visualization: Accurat.it

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HE “REVOLVING DOOR” data, displayed in the above visualization, reveals 55 cases of individuals moving from positions at Google into the federal government, and 197 individuals moving from positions inside the government to jobs at Google. The data includes positions at firms that Eric Schmidt owns or controls — Civis Analytics, The Groundwork, and Tomorrow Ventures — along with two law firms and three lobbying firms that have represented Google. On the government side, staffers at Obama for America and

a handful of other political campaigns were included.

The data includes individuals from Google appointed to government boards while maintaining their positions at the tech firm. Google board member John Doerr was

appointed to the [President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness](#) in February 2011. Eric Schmidt has been part of the [President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology](#) since 2009. He was also more recently appointed to lead the [Defense Innovation Advisory Board](#) at the Pentagon, which occurred outside the time frame of the data.

But the bulk of the moves involved job changes. Google alums work in the departments of State, Defense, Commerce, Education, Justice, and Veterans Affairs. One works at the Federal Reserve, another at the U.S. Agency for International Development. The highest number — 29 — moved from Google into the White House. The State Department had the next highest with just five. The moves from Google to government got more frequent in the later Obama years; 11 occurred in 2014 and 16 in 2015, after only 18 in the entire first term.

On the other side, former staffers from 36 different areas across the government have found a willing employer at Google since 2009. Johanna Shelton was a senior counsel on the House Energy and Commerce Telecommunications Subcommittee. Joshua Wright, a former commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission, [rotated into a top position](#) at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, one of the law firms that has represented Google.

Nineteen researchers and scientists at NASA, senior analysts at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, an “information assurance expert” at the National Security Agency, and 32 separate officials with the Obama for America campaign found their way to Google.

Former employees of 12 of the 15 cabinet agencies (Energy, Justice, Defense, Education, State, Treasury, Commerce, Agriculture, Labor, HHS, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs) now work at the tech company or its affiliates, led by 16 former Pentagon staffers. The exodus ramped up in the second term, hitting 41 in 2014, compared to just six in 2009.

Seven individuals made a full revolution through the revolving door, either going from Google to government and back again, or from government to Google and back again. This includes Julia Duncan, who left her job as White House personnel officer to go work in Google's finance department in 2013, and a year later moved to the State Department's Office of Food Security.

Nathan Parker, a staff software engineer at Google, did a stint in the U.S. Digital Service for four months before returning to Google HQ in Mountain View. Austin Lau was a planner and tech lead for Google India, then became a foreign service officer at the State Department before returning to Google to work on social impact partnerships.

A few individuals are listed twice: The aforementioned Mikey Dickerson moved from Google to the Obama campaign, back to Google, and then to the U.S. Digital Service, for example.



Illustration by The Intercept. Photo: Shutterstock

The government and Google shared engineers, lawyers, scientists, communications specialists, executives, and even board members. Google has achieved a kind of vertical integration with the government: a true public-private partnership.

Ex-Google staffers may not be directly involved in setting policy that affects Google, but they have access to decision-makers. They maintain ties to their former bosses. And Google employees with government experience have a network of friends and colleagues at federal agencies, House and Senate offices, the West Wing, and practically everywhere else.

Methodology:

The chart depicting White House visits is based on meetings between White House officials and employees of Google or companies controlled by Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google's parent company, since President Obama took office in 2009 through October 2015. The data has been compiled from [White House visitor records](#).

Large gatherings, such as state dinners and White House tours were excluded. Names were cross-referenced with lists of Google employees.

The jobs visualization was compiled from publicly available information including LinkedIn profiles, news sources, lobby disclosure records, and OpenSecrets.org data. Analysts gathered data by searching for profiles mentioning Google and terms related to government jobs. The data includes any job changes that occurred during Obama's presidency, as well as moves from Obama's campaign to Google in 2008.

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CONTACT THE AUTHOR:



David Dayen

david.dayen@gmail.com

[@ddayen](#)

ADDITIONAL CREDITS:



Research: [Andrea Jones](#), [John Thomason](#) and [Margot Williams](#).

