Federal Election Commission: Membership and Policymaking Quorum, In Brief

Updated June 24, 2020
Summary

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) is the nation’s civil campaign finance regulator. The agency ensures that campaign fundraising and spending is publicly reported; that those regulated by the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) and by commission regulations comply and have access to guidance; and that publicly financed presidential campaigns receive funding.

Between August 31, 2019, and June 5, 2020, when only three commissioners remained in office, the Federal Election Commission operated without a policymaking quorum. FECA requires that at least four of six commissioners agree to undertake many of the agency’s key policymaking duties. The Senate confirmed James E. “Trey” Trainor III as a fourth commissioner on May 19, 2020. He was sworn in on June 5, 2020.

Provided that at least four commissioners remain in office, the FEC’s policymaking quorum is now restored. Two seats remain unfilled. This report remains available to provide congressional readers with historical background on scenarios with fewer than four commissioners in office. This CRS report briefly explains the kinds of actions that FECA precludes when a quorum is not possible because fewer than four FEC members are in office. The 2019-2020 episode marked the second quorum loss in the agency’s history—the first occurred for six months in 2008—leaving the commission unable to hold hearings, issue rules, and enforce campaign finance law and regulation.

This report will be updated in the event of substantial changes in the Federal Election Commission’s policymaking quorum or the status of commission nominations.
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Introduction

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) is an independent regulatory agency headed by six commissioners. Congress created the FEC in 1974, after controversial fundraising during 1960s presidential campaigns and the early 1970s Watergate scandal. The FEC is responsible for administering federal campaign finance law and for civil enforcement of the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA). The FEC also discloses campaign finance data to the public, conducts compliance training, and administers public financing for participating presidential campaigns.

FECA establishes six-year terms for commission members. Commissioners may continue in “holdover” status after those terms end. Commissioners are appointed by the President and are subject to Senate confirmation. FECA requires that at least four of the six commissioners vote to make decisions on substantive actions. This includes deciding on enforcement actions, advisory opinions, and rulemaking matters. Because FECA also requires commission membership representing more than one political party, achieving at least four agreeing votes is sometimes difficult, even with six members present. Vacancies make the task harder by reducing opportunities for a coalition of at least four votes.

On May 19, 2020, the Senate confirmed James E. “Trey” Trainor III to a seat previously vacated by Matthew S. Petersen. The Petersen seat had been vacant since August 31, 2019. With only three of six commissioners remaining in office after Petersen’s departure, the FEC lost its policymaking quorum. The agency held its first open meeting with a restored policymaking quorum on June 18, 2020.

The 2019-2020 quorum loss was the second and longest in the agency’s history. In 2008, the FEC lost its policymaking quorum for six months. As of this writing, two commissioner seats remain vacant. It is unclear when or whether the President might nominate new Federal Election Commissioners or such nominations might receive Senate consideration.

This report provides a brief overview of policymaking implications when fewer than four Federal Election Commissioners remain in office. The topic may be relevant for congressional oversight of the agency and for Senate consideration of nominees, or if the agency again loses its policymaking quorum. Other CRS products provide additional information about campaign finance policy, the FEC, and procedural issues. This report does not provide legal analysis.

A Note on Terminology

The terms FEC, commission, and agency often—including in other CRS products—are used interchangeably to refer to the Federal Election Commission. Because this report emphasizes policymaking and enforcement duties specified in statute, it generally reserves commission to

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denote appointed members of the FEC, as opposed to agency staff. In this report, *agency* and *FEC* generally refer to the commission and staff collectively.

## Recent Vacancies and Nomination Activity

As of this writing, four of six FEC commissioners currently are in office, as shown in Table 1 below.

### Table 1. Current Federal Election Commissioners and Vacancies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commissioner</th>
<th>Term Expiration</th>
<th>Date Confirmed</th>
<th>Party Affiliation</th>
<th>Vacancy Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caroline C. Hunter</td>
<td>04/30/2013</td>
<td>06/24/2008</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(remains in holdover status)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven T. Walther</td>
<td>04/30/2009</td>
<td>06/24/2008</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(remains in holdover status)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen L. Weintraub</td>
<td>04/30/2007</td>
<td>03/18/2003</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(remains in holdover status)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James E. “Tray” Trainor III</td>
<td>04/30/2023</td>
<td>05/19/2020</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Previous occupant Ann M. Ravel (D); resignation effective 02/28/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Previous occupant Lee E. Goodman (R); resignation effective 02/16/2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Legislative Information System/Congress.gov nominations database. CRS added party affiliation based on FEC publications and press accounts.

Current and recent vacancies developed as follows:

- Effective February 28, 2017, Democratic Commissioner Ann M. Ravel resigned, leaving the commission with five members. Ravel’s term would have expired on April 30, 2017. No nominee for the Ravel seat has been announced.
- On February 7, 2018, Republican Commissioner Lee Goodman announced his intention to resign, effective February 16, 2018. Once Goodman left the FEC, the commission had four remaining members. No nominee for the Goodman seat has been announced.

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As discussed in more detail below, President Trump nominated James E. “Trey” Trainor III to Republican Commissioner Matthew S. Petersen’s seat during the 115th and 116th Congresses. Petersen initially remained in office, and resigned effective August 31, 2019. The commission dropped to three members, thus losing its policymaking quorum. The Senate confirmed Trainor to the seat on May 19, 2020. He was sworn in on June 5, 2020, thus restoring the agency’s policymaking quorum.

It is unclear whether any other commissioners currently plan to leave. For several years, periodic reports have suggested that one or more other commissioners also plan to depart.

Background on Circumstances Surrounding the Petersen Vacancy

Commissioner Petersen’s departure from the FEC, which preceded the Trainor confirmation, ended a two-year period of uncertainty about when a vacancy in his seat might occur. A brief description appears below for historical reference.

- On September 11, 2017, President Trump nominated Petersen for a federal judgeship. Petersen subsequently withdrew from consideration for the judgeship, reportedly writing, “until the time is otherwise appropriate, I look forward to returning to my duties at the Federal Election Commission.” Petersen remained on the commission in holdover status until his August 31, 2019, resignation.

- After Petersen was nominated to the federal judgeship, but before he withdrew from consideration for that position, President Trump nominated James E. “Trey” Trainor III to the Petersen seat. Petersen continued serving at the commission, and the Trainor nomination was returned to the President at the end of the first session. The White House resubmitted the nomination on January 8, 2018.


2018, at the start of the second session of the 115th Congress, and the nomination was returned to the President at the end of the Congress.\textsuperscript{14} The White House resubmitted the Trainor nomination at the beginning of the 116th Congress, and again early in the second session of the 116th Congress.\textsuperscript{15} The Senate Rules and Administration Committee held a hearing on the Trainor nomination on March 10, 2020. It ordered the nomination reported favorably on May 7, 2020. The Senate confirmed Trainor to the seat on May 19, 2020.\textsuperscript{16}

The Commission, Policymaking, and Appointments

Original, Invalidated Appointment Structure

Congress originally designed eight positions for the FEC: six commissioners and two nonvoting \textit{ex officio} members (the Clerk of the House and Secretary of the Senate). Under that structure, two commissioners were appointed by the President, two by the President pro tempore of the Senate, and two by the Speaker of the House.

Two federal court decisions altered the FEC’s original design. First and most significantly, in \textit{Buckley v. Valeo} (1976) the Supreme Court of the United States invalidated the original appointments method, holding that congressional appointments violated the Constitution’s Appointments Clause.\textsuperscript{17} Almost 20 years later, a federal court again found fault with the FEC’s appointment structure. In 1993, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia held in \textit{FEC v. NRA Political Victory Fund} that the presence of the two congressional \textit{ex officio} members violated constitutional separation of powers.\textsuperscript{18} Congress did not amend FECA responding to this decision, although the \textit{ex officio} members are no longer appointed.

Current Appointment Structure

In a broad revision of FECA in 1976, undertaken in response to the \textit{Buckley} decision, Congress adopted the current appointment method. Today, all commissioners are presidentially appointed subject to Senate advice and consent.\textsuperscript{19} Members of the congressional leadership or committees of jurisdiction (the House Committee on House Administration and Senate Rules and Administration Committee) apparently continue to influence the appointment process.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[14]{See PNs 1024 and 1425, https://www.congress.gov/ .}
\footnotetext[15]{See PNs 197 and 1600, https://www.congress.gov/ .}
\footnotetext[16]{The Senate confirmed Trainor with a 49-43 vote. See record vote no. 96.}
\footnotetext[18]{6 F.3d 821 (D.C. Cir. 1993); cert. denied (513 U.S. 88 (1994)). For legal analysis for \textit{Buckley} and campaign finance issues, see CRS Report R43719, \textit{Campaign Finance: Constitutionality of Limits on Contributions and Expenditures}, by L. Paige Whitaker.}
\footnotetext[19]{52 U.S.C. §30106(a)(1).}
\footnotetext[20]{Members of the congressional leadership reportedly suggest nominees, although documentation of the practice is sparse. In one example, from 2005, Sen. Reid stated that he was “very pleased that the president acted today upon my two recommendations for Commissioners.” See Sen. Harry Reid, “Reid Statement on Nominations to the Federal Election Commission,” press release, December 16, 2005. On congressional influence on presidential appointments}
FECA specifies few qualifications for FEC commissioners, noting simply that they “shall be chosen on the basis of their experience, integrity, impartiality, and good judgment.” As one former general counsel notes, although many commissioners are lawyers, “a commissioner does not have to be a lawyer and the commission has a long history of having non-lawyers serve as members.” Commissioners typically have experience as congressional staffers, political professionals, election lawyers, or some combination thereof.

**Party Balance and Terms**

No more than three commissioners may be affiliated with the same political party. In practice, the commission has been divided equally among Democrats and Republicans, although one current commissioner identifies as an independent. FECA staggers commissioner terms so that two expire every other April 30 during odd-numbered years (e.g., 2019, 2021, etc.). This arrangement means that, at least as designed, two new commissioners would assume office biennially. However, the President is under no obligation to make biennial nominations.

**Expired Terms and Holdover Status**

Currently, FEC commissioners may serve a single six-year term. As another CRS report explains, for some federal boards and commissions, including the FEC, “[a]n individual may be nominated and confirmed for a seat for the remainder of an unexpired term in order to replace an appointee who has resigned (or died). Alternatively, an individual might be nominated for an upcoming term with the expectation that the new term will be underway by the time of confirmation.” Some FEC commissioners have assumed office when the term for which they were nominated was well underway. For example, on June 24, 2008, the Senate confirmed Donald F. McGahn and Steven T. Walther to terms that expired just 10 months later, on April 30, 2009. Both continued serving in their seats past the expiration of their terms, although they could have been replaced through subsequent appointments.

These and other commissioners could remain in office because FECA permits FEC members to serve in “holdover” status, exercising full powers of the office, after their terms expire “until his or her successor has taken office as a Commissioner.”

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24 Steven T. Walther identifies himself as an independent. Sen. Reid recommended Walther to the commission and Walther reportedly worked for Democratic clients before joining the FEC. Walther often votes with Democrats on the FEC, although he has emphasized his independence since early in his commission tenure. See, for example, Matthew Murray, “Walther Takes on Washington,” *Roll Call* online, January 13, 2009, http://www.rollcall.com/news/-31322-1.html.


29 A commissioner may remain in office after the expiration of his or her term unless or until (1) the President...
At Least Four Agreeing Votes Required for Most Policymaking

FECA requires affirmative votes from at least four commissioners to authorize most policymaking or enforcement activity. In particular, this includes

- holding hearings;
- making, amending, or repealing rules;
- initiating litigation or defending the agency in litigation, including appeals;
- issuing advisory opinions;
- conducting investigations, and making referrals to other enforcement agencies;
- approving enforcement actions and audits; and
- issuing and amending forms (e.g., those used in the disclosure process).  

Matters without at least four votes for or against an action can have the effect of leaving questions of law, regulation, or enforcement unresolved, as some view the issues in question as having been neither approved nor rejected.

When fewer than four commissioners remain in office, existing campaign law and regulation remain in effect. Agency staff and remaining commissioners may continue to provide general information, and to prepare for a repopulated commission. In addition, as explained below, the commission revised its internal procedures before it last lost a policymaking quorum to clarify functions during a quorum loss.

Historical Note: Loss of Policymaking Quorum in 2008

The significance of the four-vote threshold first became evident in 2008. Following expired recess appointments and amid ongoing Senate consideration of FEC nominations, the agency had just two commissioners for the first six months of the year. In late 2007, in anticipation of only two commissioners remaining in office in 2008, commissioners amended the FEC’s rules of internal procedure to permit executing some duties if the commission lost its four-member policymaking quorum. These revisions to the FEC’s Directive 10 permit the commission to continue meeting with fewer than four members to approve general public information, such as

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educational guides; appoint certain staff; and approve other basic administrative and employment matters.\(^{32}\)

During the loss of the commission’s policymaking quorum in 2008, the two remaining commissioners (David Mason (R) and Ellen Weintraub (D)) met publicly to discuss advisory opinions, but could not vote to approve or disapprove those opinions. At the time, the commissioners explained that although they recognized that the commission lacked a quorum, they were attempting to provide general feedback, particularly given the ongoing 2008 election cycle. That practice generated some controversy, however, as some practitioners contended that remaining commissioners did not have the authority to meet and provide guidance.\(^{33}\) (The commission did not hold public discussions such as these during the 2019-2020 quorum loss.)

After the Senate confirmed nominees in June 2008, the new commissioners faced a backlog of enforcement matters, litigation, advisory opinions, and rulemakings to implement portions of the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act (HLOGA).\(^{34}\) The commission returned to normal operations during the rest of 2008 and throughout 2009.

**Concluding Comments**

When the FEC loses its policymaking quorum, agency operations do not cease. The agency remains open for business with remaining commissioners and its regular staff. Previously authorized work requiring commission approval may continue. Although new enforcement or policy matters cannot advance until a quorum is reconstituted, a repopulated commission could consider older matters.\(^{35}\) In addition, the Justice Department may pursue criminal enforcement on its own authority, regardless of the FEC’s operating capacity for civil matters.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{35}\) The statute of limitations for civil and criminal violations is five years. See 28 U.S.C. §2462 and 52 U.S.C. §30145, respectively. Other actions, such as rulemaking activities that are already under way, may continue indefinitely. However, as noted above, new rulemakings could not be initiated or finalized without a quorum.

\(^{36}\) For an overview of various civil versus criminal provisions and administration/enforcement in campaigns and elections, see CRS Report R45302, Federal Role in U.S. Campaigns and Elections: An Overview, by R. Sam Garrett.
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