



# THE VACANCIES ACT: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## WHAT IS THE VACANCIES ACT?

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The [Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998](#) aims to encourage the president to fill the critical leadership positions requiring Senate confirmation (so-called PAS positions) by limiting the amount of days someone can serve in those roles in an acting capacity.

If qualifying PAS positions are not filled by a Senate-confirmed official by the statutory cut-off dates proscribed in the act and described below, the office “shall remain vacant,” and only the head of the affected agency (for example, the Secretary of the Treasury or the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency) may perform the specific duties and functions assigned by statute or regulation to that position.

## WHO CAN FILL A VACANT PAS POSITION?

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When a PAS position becomes vacant, there are [three types of officials who may carry out the duties of the office in an acting capacity](#), without Senate confirmation.

1. The “first assistant” becomes the acting officer unless the president designates another individual from the other two eligible classes of officials. The Vacancies Act does not define “first assistant,” but the term has generally been interpreted to mean the top deputy to the position.
2. The president may designate as the acting official an individual who serves in another PAS position anywhere in the federal government.
3. The president may designate as the acting official an agency employee who is paid at the GS-15 rate or above and who has been an employee of the agency for at least 90 of the past 365 days preceding the vacancy.

In March 2017, the Supreme Court ruled in [National Labor Relations Board v. SW General, Inc.](#) that the Vacancies Act generally prohibits a person from serving in an acting capacity while concurrently the nominee for the position, though there are some exceptions. The court’s analysis was similar to that of the Office of Personnel Management’s inspector general, who in February 2016 issued a [memorandum](#) finding that Beth Cobert’s service as acting OPM director was in violation of the Vacancies Act once President Obama nominated her for the position. The IG stated that, as a result, the decisions Cobert made when serving in violation of the act were nullified and subject to court challenges.

## HOW LONG DOES THE VACANCIES ACT ALLOW AN ACTING OFFICIAL TO SERVE IN A PAS POSITION?

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Generally, the Vacancies Act places a [210-day cap](#) on the period in which someone can execute the functions of a PAS position on a temporary basis. The time limit begins to run on the date the vacancy occurs.

Years in which a first-term president is inaugurated, however, are treated differently. Positions that are vacant during the 60-day period beginning on Inauguration Day [may be filled in an acting capacity for up to 300 days](#) (in

other words, 90 days longer than the general 210-day cap). For example, the 300-day limit for a vacancy that existed on inauguration day on January 20, 2017 ran through November 16, 2017.

The [time limit for an acting official is suspended](#), however, if the president nominates someone to the PAS position. For example, if someone is serving as acting deputy secretary at a cabinet agency and another individual is nominated to that position, the 210- or 300-day countdown (whichever is applicable) would effectively stop while the nomination is pending before the Senate. If the nominee for that deputy secretary position is rejected, returned or withdrawn, the president is provided an additional 210 days in which he could assign an individual to that role in an acting capacity. If a second nominee is submitted for the deputy secretary position, the 210-day countdown is again suspended while the nomination is pending. If this second nomination fails, the acting official may serve another 210 days after the failure of the nomination. Once that 210-day cap is reached, the position is considered vacant.

## WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE VACANCIES ACT CAP IS REACHED?

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As noted above, [once the Vacancies Act cap is reached](#), the PAS position is vacant and the functions or duties vested in the vacant position by statute or regulation are delegated to the head of the agency. The Vacancies Act also [requires the head of the agency to report the vacancy](#) to both the Government Accountability Office and to Congress. The act [requires GAO to report Vacancies Act violations](#) to Congress, the president and the Office of Personnel Management. Additionally, as illustrated by *National Labor Relations Board v. SW General, Inc.*, parties with standing may take legal action to challenge decisions made by officials acting inconsistently with the Vacancies Act.

Interestingly, the law does not account for circumstances in which the vacancy in question is that of the agency head and the Vacancies Act cap has been reached. In short, the law delegates the authorities of vacant positions to the agency head, but does not articulate what happens when the vacancy itself is the top position at the agency. [The Senate report accompanying the legislation](#) stated that the authorities of a vacant agency head are not addressed in the act “because the Committee expects that there will never be a case where a nomination for these positions is not timely submitted.”

Congress sometimes asks GAO to issue opinions on whether particular officials serving in acting capacities served in violation of the Vacancies Act. Since passage of the Act, GAO has issued [26 opinions](#) finding vacant positions filled in contradiction to the requirements of the Act. In 2019, GAO also reviewed appointments of the acting Secretary and acting Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security and concluded that their service was inconsistent with the Department’s succession statute.

## ARE ANY POSITIONS EXEMPTED FROM THE VACANCIES ACT?

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The Vacancies Act specifically exempts particular agencies from some or all of its provisions. Congress [exempted the following positions](#) from all Vacancies Act provisions:

- Anyone who is a member of a board, commission or similar multi-headed agency that governs an independent federal establishment or government corporation who is appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate.
- Any commissioner of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.
- Any member of the Surface Transportation Board.
- Any judge appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate to an Article I court (administrative law judges, certain military judges, U.S. Tax Court judges).

Furthermore, Congress [exempted some positions](#) from particular provisions of the act because executing the functions and duties of those positions requires independence from the agency head. Congress did not want to create a circumstance in which these [independent duties of these positions could be delegated](#) to the agency head. These positions are:

- The general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board.
- The general counsel of the Federal Labor Relations Board.
- Any inspector general appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate.
- Any chief financial officer appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate.
- Any office in which a statutory provision prohibits the agency head from performing its duties.

Vacancies in some PAS positions may be governed not by the Vacancies Act, but by a separate statute (as GAO found in examining the positions of Secretary and Deputy Secretary at DHS). The Senate report accompanying the Vacancies Act discussed [40 separate positions](#) with unique statutory language that address the functions and duties of those positions should a vacancy arise.

## WHAT MIGHT BE THE EFFECTS OF VACANCIES ACT VIOLATIONS?

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Reporting and enforcement of Vacancies Act violations have historically been inconsistent. An increased interest in federal PAS vacancies has brought Vacancies Act issues to the forefront; still, it's often unclear what the ramifications of Vacancies Act violations might be.

The Act itself does not offer a particular punishment for violating the provisions other than stating that actions taken by anyone serving in a federal role that do not comply with the provision of the Act “[shall have no force or effect](#).” As noted above, decisions made by someone found to be serving in violation of the Vacancies Act can be nullified and are subject to court challenge. For example, a person may choose to file a Vacancies Act lawsuit if he or she believes an agency's actions or decisions caused them harm and the federal position vested with the authority to take that action or make that decision was made by a person who may be serving in violation of the Vacancies Act.

## WHAT STEPS SHOULD AGENCIES BE TAKING TO DETERMINE POSSIBLE IMPACTS OF THE VACANCIES ACT?

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In light of the caps imposed by the Vacancies Act, agency leadership should ask a series of questions to understand the implications:

- Does the Vacancies Act apply to a position, or is there another statute that governs the execution of a position's duties and functions?
- If the Vacancies Act applies:
  - What is the applicable cap on the service of an acting official in that role and from what date does it run?
  - What are the functions and duties that would revert to the head of the agency once the cap is reached?