



SENATE TRADITIONALLY CONFIRMS FIRST CABINET SECRETARIES WITHIN DAYS OF INAUGURATION

For Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama, 84% of Cabinet secretaries nominated before Inauguration Day received quick Senate approval – an average of 2.4 days.

95% of Cabinet nominees have received pre-inaugural hearings.

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Having Cabinet positions filled by Senate-confirmed appointees benefits new administrations – and more importantly, the country – by enabling presidents to hit the ground running, especially during times of crisis. An examination of the last four incoming presidents shows that each announced most of their desired Cabinet secretaries during their transition, and the Senate generally moved quickly to confirm those nominations.¹ On average, 95% of these secretary nominees receive confirmation hearings before the inauguration. For Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, the confirmations of their secretary picks occurred almost immediately following the moment they took the oath of office on Jan. 20.

Traditionally, the Senate has begun consideration of top nominees even before Inauguration Day recognizing the need for confirmed leadership in the new administration. The confirmation process strengthens ties between the executive and legislative branches by allowing the president’s appointees and the Senate committees an opportunity to discuss their respective priorities and views. The Partnership for Public Service has long advocated the importance of new administrations getting appointees in their seats quickly, including during the Trump administration.² Cooperation between the Senate and the incoming president on this important process is a staple of recent transitions.

Presidents get almost all of their initial Cabinet secretary nominations confirmed quickly

Cabinet secretaries announced during the transition period Officially submitted to the Senate

President	Nominated	Confirmed	%
Clinton	14	13	93%
W. Bush	14	14	100%
Obama	13	12	92%
Trump	15	14	93%
Combined	56	53	95%

Source: Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition analysis of data from Congress.gov, Senate.gov and media reports.

Note: Does not include Cabinet officials who were held over from the previous administration or who were announced but never officially submitted to the Senate. Includes the secretaries of the 15 statutory Cabinet departments.

¹ This report examines the secretaries of the 15 salutatory Cabinet departments: Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security (created in 2002), Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs. Presidents have the ability to include Cabinet secretaries from other agencies if they want, and that representation in the Cabinet has changed over time.

² Partnership for Public Service and Washington Post, “Tracking how many key positions Trump has filled so far”. Available at <https://wapo.st/3g7pnwp>



The last four presidents combined to announce 56 nominees for Cabinet secretary positions during their transitions.³ Most of these public announcements came in December, as the newly elected presidents started to fill their key staff. Each of these presidents was able to get almost all their early Cabinet secretary nominees into office, with only one or two nominees per president facing difficulties and ultimately not getting confirmed. In total, in the last 28 years, the Senate has confirmed 95% of the president’s cabinet secretary nominations.

Cabinet secretaries get confirmed quickly

Under Presidents Clinton, W. Bush and Obama, Cabinet secretary nominations announced during the transition period were confirmed by the Senate in an average of just 2.4 days.

The Senate confirmed Clinton’s nominees in less than one day on average, and W. Bush’s in less than two days. Obama’s nominees took slightly longer with an average of about five days; Obama’s average dropped due to delays for two nominations – the confirmations of Attorney General Eric Holder (13 days) and Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis (35 days). Otherwise, Obama’s nominees were confirmed on average within 1.1 days.

Cabinet secretaries announced during the transition period	
Confirmed by the Senate	
President	Avg. number of days
Clinton	0.8
W. Bush	1.6
Obama	4.9
Trump	23.9

Source: Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition analysis of data from Congress.gov, Senate.gov and media reports.
Note: Does not include Cabinet officials who were held over from the previous administration or who were announced but never officially submitted to the Senate. Includes the secretaries of the 15 statutory Cabinet departments.

While Trump’s nominees took an average of nearly 24 days each to confirm., his experience was the exception rather than the rule. Because of the transition’s leadership changes immediately following the election, the Trump transition had a late start selecting and vetting candidates. This late start, combined with paperwork delays for nominees and the fact that a number of nominees had particularly complicated financial portfolios, added days to the confirmation process. Some of Trump’s nominees faced additional procedural votes to advance their nominations, due to a lack of bipartisan support. Even with those problems, 14 of the 15 secretaries Trump officially submitted to the Senate were eventually confirmed.

Appointee preparation is vital for success in the Senate and allows for greater cooperation between the administration and Congress. Following the experiences of recent administrations, the Center for Presidential Transition launched our Ready to Serve program providing resources to prepare Senate-confirmed nominees and allow the confirmation process to run as smoothly as possible.⁴ Ready to Serve highlights the importance for nominees to prepare accurate and complete paperwork for their national security clearances and ethics reviews well in advance.

³ This number excludes nominees who were announced but never officially submitted to the Senate and five Cabinet officials who were held over from the previous administration and did not need a new Senate confirmation vote. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was held over by Obama.

⁴ To learn more, please see <https://presidentialtransition.org/readytoserve/>.

Most nominees announced prior to Inauguration Day and are approved within days

Because the filling of Cabinet secretary positions is so important for the functioning of our government, Congress has traditionally held committee hearings on high-level nominees before a president takes office on Jan. 20.⁵ With pre-inaugural hearings, a newly sworn in President can formally submit nominations to the Senate on the day of the inauguration for immediate Senate action.

All recent presidents have taken advantage of this option. As a result, 52 of the 56 Cabinet nominees (93%) announced during transitions were formally submitted on Inauguration Day. In most cases, the Senate matched this quick action.

All except for one secretary nominee submitted by Clinton on Inauguration Day was confirmed within five days of his taking office. Seven of W. Bush’s were approved on Inauguration Day itself and 10 were confirmed by Jan. 25. Six of Obama’s secretaries were approved on his first day in office and nine of the 13 were confirmed within five days.

For those three presidents combined, 42% of the secretary nominations officially submitted on Inauguration Day were confirmed by the Senate that same day, and 84% were confirmed within five days of the president taking office.

Cabinet secretaries submitted to the Senate on Inauguration Day					
President	Total submitted on Inauguration Day	Confirmed			
		Day of Inauguration	within 1 to 5 days	total within 5 days	% confirmed within 5 days
Clinton	14	3	10	13	93%
W. Bush	11	7	3	10	91%
Obama	13	6	3	9	69%
Trump	14	2	0	2	14%

Source: Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition analysis of data from Congress.gov, Senate.gov and media reports.
Note: Does not include Cabinet officials who were held over from the previous administration or who were announced but never officially submitted to the Senate. Includes the secretaries of the 15 statutory Cabinet departments.

Conclusion

The Senate’s role to advise and consent on key executive branch nominations is a crucial part of the governing process and one for which new administrations must plan thoroughly. Recent transitions have shown that quick confirmations of Cabinet secretary positions are the norm rather than the exception. Such cooperation is not just important for a new president, but for the overall functioning of the government during periods of transition.

⁵ Congressional Research Service, “Filling Advice and Consent Positions at the Outset of Recent Administrations, 1981-2009,” R40119, Feb. 25, 2017, 7. Available at <https://bit.ly/2HX4lnC>