

Alert

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Cozen Currents: Staffing Trump 2.0

“President-elect Trump is quickly centralizing power in the White House and looking to install loyalists in Cabinet agencies with the goal of avoiding the internal dissension that at times plagued his first administration.” — Howard Schweitzer, CEO, Cozen O’Connor Public Strategies

The Cozen Lens

- President-elect Trump has put key allies in czar roles overseeing top policy areas, adopting a power structure that centralizes authority in the White House.
- Trump’s planned power structure with policy leadership heavily driven by the White House could improve implementation and planning in some areas, but it may create power struggles elsewhere.
- This Trump administration will see heightened influence from advisors and outsiders who hold no official office.

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The Czar-Based Power Structure

Czars Are Not Just in Russia. President-elect Trump has named key allies to top “czar” roles.

- For decades, presidents have appointed advisors with broad portfolios addressing major issues. The media has termed these aides, who do not formally lead federal agencies, “czars.” Trump appears to be turning to czars for some of his top priorities, including immigration and energy.
- Trump has announced that former Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Director Tom Homan will serve as an immigration czar focused on border security. He oversaw the controversial family separation policy during Trump’s first term.
- Trump has selected Governor Doug Burgum (R-ND), an erstwhile rival for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, to be his secretary of the Interior. Burgum will also have a czar role as chairman of Trump’s new National Energy Council, responsible for coordinating energy policy. Trump announced that in this capacity Burgum will be part of the National Security Council.
- Trump reportedly wants to install former US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer as a trade czar. This would give him a major role in quarterbacking the Trump administration’s trade agenda and economic policy writ large regardless of who is nominated for formal economic policy jobs.

Trump 2.0’s Power Structure. A reliance on czars centralizes power in the White House.

- Trump’s use of czars is significant because these appointees are responsible for overseeing policy across the dividing lines between agencies and are based in the White



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House, reporting directly to the president.

- While Burgum as secretary of the Interior must be confirmed by the Senate, most czar appointments are not subject to Senate confirmation because the jobs are a creation of the president. This allows Trump to avoid subjecting his selections for czars to scrutiny by senators. Along with his demand for *recess appointments*, this erodes the checks and balances of the Senate's duty to "advise and consent" for top executive branch positions.

Policy Implementation. While czars may be influential, their tools for execution are more limited.

- Based in the White House, czars don't have direct power over the bureaucracies responsible for policy implementation, but they do have a direct line to Trump.
- Czars' influence will depend on how closely they can get agencies to follow their lead in enacting policy. A power structure centered in the White House would require other appointees up and down the executive branch to follow through with the decisions made at the top. Czars won't be able to do it alone. They need those in charge of federal agencies to participate in policy execution.

The Opportunities and Risks of Trump's Power Structure

Singing from the Same Song Sheet. The incoming Trump administration's power structure could improve inter-agency coordination by allowing for more effective whole-of-government initiatives.

- Trump's structure will work best when individuals align on policy proposals. The White House will be influential in setting policy, but implementation will be left to the agency heads. This means that policy areas where the White House and the regulators have a hand-in-glove relationship and share ideological perspectives will operate smoothest.
- Immigration is one area where the early nominees suggest that cooperation should be smooth between the White House and agency heads, as Tom Homan, the immigration czar, and Governor Kristi Noem (R-SD), the nominee for secretary of Homeland Security, share hardline immigration views. Their positions will be bolstered by the placement of Stephen Miller, also a hardliner, as Trump's deputy chief of staff of policy. Convincing career staff to support these policies will likely be easier than at other agencies, further reducing friction in implementing Trump's plans.
- Foreign policy, particularly concerning China, is another issue with a high degree of alignment among Trump's announced staff. Nominating Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Rep. Mike Waltz (R-FL) to serve as his secretary of State and national security advisor, respectively, places China hawks in prominent positions. Robert Lighthizer's expected appointment will further bolster the power of China hawks in the Trump administration.

The Potential Internal Battles. Trump's power structure is not without risk, and while he may not have a "team of rivals" in his administration, this does not mean his presidency will be without internal conflict.

- The most likely conflicts will occur in areas where the White House and agency heads are less closely aligned on policy. An example of this could be Trump's effort to impose tariffs, which could see pushback from Trump's Treasury secretary, depending on who he selects, as Scott Bessent is seen as less supportive of these initiatives than other candidates. In these instances, Trump will likely be called on as an arbiter, which will make understanding the relationship dynamics between Trump and his staff paramount to interpreting the Trump administration.
- Other potential pitfalls include clashes with the career staff who have different

ideological views than the agency heads. Agencies where this would most likely be evident are those that Democrats have placed more importance on than their GOP counterparts, such as the

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the Department of Health and Human Services. One of the EPA's top union officials is already calling on Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-NY), Trump's nominee to head the agency, to "make a sharp departure from Trump's previous legacy," potentially an early warning sign of conflict.

- In addition to ideological fights with the bureaucracy, structural clashes could occur if Trump chooses to re-implement his Schedule F executive order. This plan would significantly increase the number of federal employees that Trump could fire and replace. The covered roles are deemed to have some influence over policy despite historically being positions filled by career civil servants. The group that could be reclassified has been estimated to be as many as 50,000.

Trump's Kitchen Cabinets

Job Titles Don't Matter. Power under President-elect Trump has always been relative to an individual's personal relationship with him, and indications are that the trend of influence, rather than official authority, granting power is only going to continue.

- Trump is running into some opposition to some of his early Cabinet picks. This may lead him to increasingly emphasize a strategy wherein he makes his close allies advisors in the White House or to advisory boards instead.
- This would grant those advisors a good deal of influence but no direct power over policy. The scope of that influence comes down to how receptive the actual agency heads are to the relevant czar's ideas, or to whether Trump is willing to settle disagreements among them. It's also worth pointing out that Trump would have the ability to fire and replace these individuals at any time; Trump is nothing if not mercurial and one could easily imagine a relationship souring at some point.
- Beyond even official positions in the White House, Trump has always remained chummy with people entirely outside of government. Between phone calls, seeing others on TV, or meeting with them in person, Trump is willing to solicit policy advice from outsiders he's on good terms with.

A Little Help from My Friends. The orbit of government-adjacent or private individuals in Trump's wider circle offering policy or political advice is broad.

- The *billionaires* that funded Trump's campaign or remain in close contact with former venture capital player Vice President-elect JD Vance also get a say. Perhaps none so much as Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who Trump has appointed to a government efficiency commission. Musk has even participated in a call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. In another example, Trump's liaison to the oil sector, Harold Hamm, a *megadonor* who offered to help cover Trump's New York bail, has called for the US to expand LNG shipping for *years*.

Trump's family also remains a presence in his kitchen cabinet. While his daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner will not be joining him in the White House for the second term, Kushner is still expected to play a role in Middle East diplomacy and Trump's son Don Jr. looks to be playing a more ubiquitous role this time around.
