

## Trump's Cabinet has become severe headache for his White House

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The president who promised an all-star cast instead faces the highest Cabinet turnover in recent history.



President Donald Trump faces roadblocks in implementing policy as Cabinet members filter out of the administration. | Alex Brandon/AP Photo

President Donald Trump has called his Cabinet “one of the finest group of people ever assembled.” He’s praised the team’s “tremendous amount of talent,” and during his 2016 campaign, he promised to hire only “the best people.”

In practice, his Cabinet has been a severe headache for White House officials since the inauguration — from its high turnover to its multiple ethics scandals to its raft of ineffective leaders, who often were unable to manage the large bureaucracies of the federal government.

The personnel chaos is now thwarting the administration’s ability to execute the president’s policy agenda in his final opportunities before an election year. When the president walks into his scheduled Cabinet meeting at the White House on Tuesday, four of the 23 people at the table will be officials operating in an “acting” capacity —

including the leaders of Homeland Security and Defense. The secretary of Labor is slated to leave the administration on Friday, adding another temporary aide to the top ranks of the Trump administration.

And in recent weeks, a handful of the top Cabinet officials have irritated either Trump or key White House officials including Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar — with the Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats reportedly on the outs as well.

Nine Cabinet officials have left the Trump administration since 2017 — either through resignations or by firing — giving it the highest turnover in recent history, according to [data](#) from the Brookings Institution. The Obama administration did not have any turnover in its Cabinet in the first two years, according to the Brookings data.

“Trump’s Cabinet turnover at 30 months has exceeded his five predecessors’ after an entire first term in office,” said Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, who oversees the Brookings data. “It is exceptional.”

Chris Lu, a former White House official under President Barack Obama who managed the Cabinet, said the situation “dispels this idea that Trump — who came in without any experience in government and who ran on the theory of being [a] businessman — could run things better. Clearly, this is not the case.”

The turnover takes a toll on policy decisions Trump is trying to enact, say former and current U.S. officials.

“There are just a couple of agencies where the president has a keen interest in policy including at DHS. But leading that agency really is one of the most difficult jobs in government, and it is near impossible to produce the results the president wants,” said one senior administration official.

“The Department of Defense has also had lots of turnover since Mattis left. Everyone is hoping everything settles down,” the official added.

Settling down does not fit into the ethos of the Trump administration. The president has acknowledged he prefers “acting” leaders to ones confirmed by the Senate because they give him more flexibility and ultimately, greater loyalty. Even his chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, who’s worked in the West Wing since late December and does not require Senate confirmation, is stuck with the “acting” title.

Administration officials downplayed the idea of any additional turnover in the Cabinet in the coming weeks. At a news conference at the White House on Monday, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin fielded a question about the way the president views Ross’ performance at Commerce. “I have every reason to think Secretary Ross is doing a good job. I’ve never heard anything otherwise,” Mnuchin said. “Secretary

Ross has been an important part of the trade team. Again, this has been an integrated team, and I think the president is very pleased on trade.”

Ross isn't the only Cabinet member in the hot seat this week, after the president privately has expressed frustration at the Commerce secretary's inability to include a question on the 2020 U.S. census about U.S. citizenship.

Trump's acting Secretary of Defense Mark Esper is scheduled to appear before a Senate committee on Tuesday for his confirmation hearing, after months of transition at the Department of Defense. The Department of Homeland Security does not have confirmed leaders in roughly 10 top slots, despite Trump's intention to make immigration a central tenet of his reelection campaign.

"President Trump has assembled an incredible team at the White House and across the federal government who — in spite of 93 percent negative news coverage — has accomplished more at this point in his first term than any president in history, including record job gains, economic growth, fair and reciprocal trade, criminal justice reform, energy independence, combating the opioid epidemic, lowering prescription drug prices, and restoring the nation's standing in the world," said Judd Deere, White House deputy press secretary.

The ongoing turnover in the Cabinet was not meant to be a storyline for the White House in 2019.

In the weeks leading up to the 2018 midterm elections, Trump plotted ways to make his Cabinet more stable and more to his liking. One White House adviser [told POLITICO last October](#) that “the president is looking to get better performers — all of these decisions are being made in the context of the reelection campaign,” the Republican said. “Trump wants the strongest possible A-team going into 2020.”

Following the Republicans' bruising losses in the midterms, the White House very quickly started to remake its Cabinet. The day after the election the former Attorney General Jeff Sessions got canned by tweet, and in the ensuing months, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, Defense Secretary James Mattis and Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen all left their posts.

Bringing in new top officials after the midterms, however, still did not satisfy the president, according to senior administration officials and close White House advisers.

The then-acting secretary of defense Pat Shanahan [earned a reputation](#) as an official who remained overly cozy with his former employee, Boeing, all while allowing top White House appointees like national security adviser John Bolton to dictate Pentagon policy. Then Labor Secretary Alex Acosta frustrated top White House aides and important business groups by moving too slowly to overturn Obama-era regulations. Key White House officials have repeatedly [clashed](#) with the

Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar over proposals on Medicaid, Obamacare and drug pricing.

The frustrations with the Cabinet never seem to end.

“I don’t think it is fair to the president,” said one former senior administration official about the level of turnover. “Every president deserves people who can focus on their agenda and just do their job without controversy.”

Even the job of managing the Cabinet is soon to be in flux. The White House’s Cabinet secretary, William McGinley, is slated to leave the administration this week after serving since Trump’s inauguration. McGinley often had the unenviable task of trying to police Trump’s Cabinet members, schooling them on government ethics, outreach to the media, policy coordination and optics.

The White House declined to comment on potential replacements for McGinley — though a few administration officials said Mulvaney would try to take the opportunity to fill the slot with a loyal aide, or a former staffer from the Office of Management and Budget.

Lu, the former Obama aide, said the lack of stability in the Trump Cabinet and lower down the ranks of federal agencies only hurts Trump’s ability to govern. The immigration raids around the country, for example, started to happen over the weekend, with no confirmed leadership at ICE or CBP, and the Department of Homeland Security does not have confirmed leadership in place as the U.S. heads into hurricane season.

“President Trump may think acting helps him ensure loyalty,” Lu said. “But you need strong leadership and continuity to push forward a strong agenda.”

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