

Cozen Currents: Staffing Up

The Cozen Lens

- Despite her relatively short time in Washington, Vice President Harris has developed an extensive network during her time in public service that she will be able to draw upon to staff her administration if elected president.
- Former President Trump is likely to rely on a network of formal and informal advisors in a second term and particularly draw on a network of MAGA think tanks preparing for a second Trump administration.
- If, as polling increasingly suggests, Republicans win a slim Senate majority next year, the razor thin margins could create an opening for moderate Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) to take on the power broker role retiring Senators Joe Manchin (I-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ) held this Congress.

Harris' Orbit

Harris' Not So Small World. While Vice President Harris does not have the long history in Washington that President Biden has, she does not lack options to staff her White House if she wins the presidency.

- Harris has spent over two decades in public service, with the vast majority coming in California. This has led to a mistaken perception that she has a small network that she could draw upon if elected president. Not all of these people will serve in official positions, with some likely to remain informal advisers as part of Harris's kitchen cabinet.
- Harris' strongest ties typically have connections to her time in office before she was elected to the Senate in 2016. While not all of these individuals are likely to work in the West Wing, they nevertheless will meaningfully shape her agenda as president.

Allies Scattered Throughout Washington. Although Harris' network in Washington may not be extensive compared to other long-time public officials, many of her closest allies and advisers have found their way to the nation's capital.

- An unavoidable part of any discussion of Harris' world is her current staff, with some key members being Chief of Staff Lorraine Voles, Brian Nelson, and her national security adviser, Phil Gordon. All three of these individuals would likely follow Harris into the White House to start her term and would help ensure a smooth transition. Beyond these top three, a group to watch is the suite of economic advisers Harris has built since launching her campaign that reflects a range of expertise and views, including progressive Bharat Ramamurti, an acolyte of Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA).
- Despite Harris only serving less than one term in the Senate from 2017 to 2021, she developed several strong allies in both chambers of Congress. Notable advocates include Senator Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), who knew Harris before serving in the Senate, and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY). The relationship between Harris and Jeffries could become particularly significant if Democrats take control of the House of Representatives and the two are working with a Republican Senate to pass the tax reform package expected next year.



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- Lastly, Harris has established connections with other members of the Biden administration, including former political rivals like Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. While Harris is likely to reshuffle the Cabinet if she wins, some members, like Buttigieg and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, could feature in a future Harris administration, though likely in new roles.

Harris' Relationships Outside of Washington. Given Harris' long service on the state level in California, it should come as little surprise that she has grown many allies outside of Washington.

- Harris has strong ties to top California officials, including Governor Gavin Newsom (D-CA) and Senators Alex Padilla (D-CA) and Laphonza Butler (D-CA). And due to her time as California attorney general (AG), she also built a network of other AGs with whom she still keeps in regular contact, including Governor Roy Cooper (D-NC). This set of former state AGs could be a group Harris looks to populate the senior ranks of her Department of Justice.
- Harris' relationship with the business community has come under significant scrutiny, and while some executives feel they have a better dialogue with her than Biden, this dynamic is probably being overplayed in how much it may skew Harris toward industry-friendly policies. There is the possibility that Harris could appoint a corporate leader for her cabinet, but more likely, she will continue to rely on this group for informal advice and keep regular contact with them as part of her kitchen cabinet.

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Trump's Orbit

Who Speaks for Trump? Former President Trump has never been a policy wonk, but a constellation of MAGA think tanks have emerged to staff and inform the governing agenda of a new administration.

- Trump has disavowed the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 after Democrats made it a political liability for him, but nearly three-quarters of its authors are former Trump officials and could return in a second Trump administration. At a 2022 Heritage conference, Trump said "they're going to lay the groundwork and detail plans for exactly what our movement will do."
- Russ Vought, former director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, could be in line to serve as Trump's chief of staff. Vought participated in Project 2025, founded the Center for Renewing America, a Christian nationalist think tank, and is reportedly developing a policy playbook for Trump to hit the ground running.
- Brooke Rollins, president and CEO of the America First Policy Institute, could also be a major player. Her think tank recently merged with the Senate Working Group, an organization aligned with the Senate GOP. This may deepen Trump world's relationships with Senate Republicans ahead of expected tax reform next year.
- Trump has continued to emphasize tariffs on the campaign trail, a sign that his former US trade representative, Robert Lighthizer, will have a major role in his administration. He could return to his previous job or become secretary of the Treasury or Commerce.

Trump's Formal and Informal Advisors. Trump has a history of speaking to a wide circle of people, including those in and out for formal roles, a dynamic that can grow palace intrigue.

- During his first term, Trump relied on a personal network of business leaders, sports figures, and outside political advisors for advice and counsel. Specific job titles are not as significant as individuals' personal relationships with Trump.
- This pattern continues. In addition to those inside the campaign, such as co-chairs Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita, Trump maintains relationships with those outside, including former acting Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Ric Grennell, former

Pentagon official Kash Patel, and Fox News personality Sean Hannity.

- Two notable new figures are in the mix this time around. Former independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and former Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) are honorary co-chairs of Trump's transition effort, which could give them influence over the selection of personnel and the direction of a second Trump administration.

Challenging Norms. A second Trump term would target norms of the executive branch.

- Trump values loyalty and his selection of Senator JD Vance (R-OH) as a running mate suggests that a second administration would be primarily staffed by loyalists. In his first term, an old guard of mainstream conservatives provided a check on some of Trump's inclinations. This time around, Trump has surrounded himself with MAGA converts and true believers.

- The Wall Street Journal reported this weekend that Trump plans to erode the Justice Department's traditional independence from the White House by replacing career personnel with his own picks and seeking retribution against political opponents. People close to Trump's thinking told the Journal that potential selections for attorney general include former DNI John Ratcliffe and Senators Eric Schmitt (R-MO), Mike Lee (R-UT), and Tom Cotton (R-AR).

The Senate's New Power Brokers?

A Red Ripple. Despite a favorable Senate map, GOP Senate candidates have largely struggled to overcome their Democratic opponents' incumbency and fundraising advantages, lowering the odds of a previously forecast red wave.

- Having entered the cycle with 49 Senate seats to Democrats' 51, the GOP needs to flip one seat to secure the Senate majority if the party also wins the presidency, or two seats for an outright majority regardless of the outcome at the presidential level. Republicans are all but certain to flip the West Virginia seat being vacated by retiring Senator Joe Manchin (I-WV). The party is also now favored to flip Senator Jon Tester's (D-MT) seat, but GOP candidates otherwise continue to trail in polls across the other six battleground Senate races.

- The upshot for Republicans is that polling suggests they are favored to flip control of the Senate, but only by a small margin. Such an outcome raises the prospect that any one or two moderate GOP Senators could serve as the deciding vote on the president's agenda, much as Senator Manchin and Senator Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ) did throughout Democrat's 50-50 and 51-49 seat majorities.

- While no senator has threatened to step into such a deciding role as of yet, a handful of GOP lawmakers who historically have gained electorally and politically from bucking their party at times are among the most likely candidates. That includes Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), who rank as the first and second most moderate GOP senators over the last Congress.

Help Wanted. Faced with a GOP Senate majority, Vice President Harris would need frequent bipartisan support to confirm judges and staff up her administration, let alone advance her legislative agenda.

- While Senate confirmations of White House personnel tend to receive more bipartisan support than legislative items, cooperation between both parties is far from guaranteed. Looking back at President Biden's first year in office, analysis from Axios found that only three GOP senators voted for more than 50 percent of Biden's 59 judicial nominees. Some Biden nominees never made it out of committee even with a Democratic Senate majority, a problem that could be worsened by GOP control of the chamber.

- Based on that same analysis by Axios, the path of least resistance for Harris will

be through Collins and Murkowski. Collins voted in favor of Biden's 2022 judicial appointments 86 percent of the time and Murkowski voted in favor of them roughly 81 percent of the time. A similar analysis of all 2023 Senate votes by Roll Call found that Collins voted with Biden about 71 percent of the time and Murkowski about 64 percent of the time.

· While the bipartisan streak between Collins and Murkowski could give Harris administration appointees a chance in the Senate, it will also have a limiting effect on their ideological backgrounds. Both senators consistently voted against Biden appointees who were labeled as progressive. As a result, the need for support from GOP senators on all Senate-confirmed nominations could force Harris to choose more moderate appointees. Similarly, NBC reports that Harris' team is considering keeping Biden administration officials already confirmed by the Senate in place to avoid prolonged confirmation fights with a GOP Senate.

We're All on the Same Team. While Murkowski and Collins are broadly supportive of the GOP agenda, they both have a history of breaking with party leadership on pivotal votes, suggesting that even a Trump administration wouldn't be clear of the difficulties created by a slim Senate majority.

· Looking back at former President Trump's first term in office, an analysis by 538 found that Murkowski voted "in line with Trump's position" on roughly 72 percent of Senate votes while Collins voted with Trump roughly 65 percent of the time. Both broke with Trump on high-profile votes, including on some of his cabinet-level appointments. Murkowski and Collins voted against Trump's nomination of Betsy DeVos to be secretary of Education and Collins alone also voted against Trump's nomination of Scott Pruitt to be administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and Andrew Wheeler's nomination for the same role years later.

Murkowski and Collins' independent streak also extended itself to agency-level appointments as well. Back in 2019 and 2020 when Trump was attempting to fill two openings on the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Collins and Murkowski played a central role in the successive failures to advance Trump's nominations of Herman Cain, Stephen Moore, and Judy Shelton. Collins went as far as to vote against Trump's pick of Shelton on the floor. Such historical opposition could prove frustrating to Trump, who has publicly telegraphed interest in appointing Fed nominees who are deferential to his own opinions on monetary policy.
