

# Trump selections for top jobs advance, despite initial controversy

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**By Liz Goodwin and Jacqueline Alemany**  
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When President-elect [Donald Trump](#) first unveiled his picks to staff his new administration, some of the more unconventional names sparked gasps and speculation that they could not amass enough support to be confirmed even in a GOP-controlled Senate.

But three days ahead of Trump's return to the White House, many of his most prominent Cabinet choices have sailed relatively unscathed through their hearings and are poised to win confirmation as Republican senators rallied around them and appeared largely unwilling to defy Trump's wishes.

Pete Hegseth, who is seeking to lead the Department of Defense, and Pam Bondi, Trump's selection for attorney general, were greeted warmly by Senate Republicans during their confirmation hearings, despite withering questions from Democrats about their independence from Trump and other matters. [Bondi](#) declined to distance herself from Trump's false declaration that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, and [Hegseth](#) dodged questions about whether he would be willing to order U.S. troops to shoot protesters.

The Trump loyalists stand in stark contrast to the president's picks eight years ago, when Gen. Jim Mattis, Trump's first defense secretary, publicly contradicted some of Trump's most firmly held beliefs, including rigorous enforcement of the Iran nuclear agreement, during his confirmation hearing; and former senator Jeff Sessions (R-Alabama) vowed to rein in his new boss if he tried to go beyond his presidential authority if confirmed as attorney general.

Those hearings presaged bitter conflicts with key appointees reluctant to carry out some of Trump's most controversial plans over the course of his first term. Eight years later, the first wave of testimony from 12 people set to helm Trump's second

administration displayed a cast of on-message loyalists who appeared to embrace and echo the ethos of the incoming administration.

Senate GOP opposition to many of the current Trump picks has not materialized, at least not publicly, after Matt Gaetz, Trump's original pick for attorney general, withdrew under pressure. No Republican lawmakers have said they will oppose Hegseth, though a handful have not made their intentions clear. Trump's nominees can lose three Republicans at most and still be confirmed if no Democrat backs them.

It's rare for the Senate to reject presidential picks. But Hegseth's apparent glide path bodes well for some of Trump's other controversial choices, like former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, his pick for director of national intelligence, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who was tapped to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. Their hearings have not been scheduled but are expected soon. Kash Patel's nomination as FBI director is also considered a harder sell.

Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-North Dakota) attributed the more controversial nominees' recent success to their hearing performances and one-on-one meetings with lawmakers — as well as the realization that voters want Trump to be empowered in picking his own Cabinet.

"The American public is pretty overwhelmingly supportive of Donald Trump's handling of the transition and really do believe that he should have his Cabinet," Cramer said.

Gabbard has worked "really, really hard" to overcome some GOP skepticism, Cramer added. She recently flipped her position on an intelligence gathering program called [Section 702](#) that allows for warrantless surveillance of overseas foreigners, which she previously opposed, to reassure nervous Republican hawks. Gabbard met twice with Sen. Mike Rounds (R-South Dakota), for example, and spoke with several members of the intelligence community that he asked her to consult with, Rounds said Wednesday. That "additional research" eased his concerns about her.

"She clearly had taken the time to go back and check on the updated 702 as it had been modified the last time it was renewed, and I was very happy to hear she understands just how significant it is and what a major part it plays in our collection efforts," Rounds said.

Support from them and Sen. James Lankford (R-Oklahoma), an intelligence panel member, helped sway others, some said.

“There are those people — Joni Ernst, James Lankford and Mike Rounds on intel — who the rest of us sort of look to for guidance, and when they tip over, everybody goes, okay,” Cramer said.

The display of fealty on Capitol Hill reflects Trump’s far greater command over the Republican Party than when he was first sworn in to office in 2017. In 2016, Republican senators had outperformed Trump on the ballot and felt little debt to the political novice. This time, almost every incoming senator in a competitive race underperformed Trump, and the party has been remade in his image.

Trump’s nominees, in turn, issued statements and described policies that closely reflect the president-elect’s “America First” vision, one that Trump allies and advisers view as a sea change from the last administration.

“Between Project 2025, America First Policy Institute, and other groups, you had four years of people thinking about policy,” said Stephen K. Bannon, host of the “Bannon’s War Room” podcast. “What you are seeing is the culmination of years of people around Trump and the MAGA movement — it’s a maturation and sophistication of what was before — and as of now the Senate Democrats don’t have a coherent response.”

In his opening testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Florida), once a darling of the GOP establishment and Trump’s pick to lead the State Department, channeled Trump’s populism, denouncing America’s prioritization of a rules-based “liberal world order” over the country’s “core national interests.” He will probably be confirmed with Democratic support.

Bondi, appearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, cast herself as someone willing to end “the partisanship, the weaponization” of the Justice Department under Merrick Garland. And Scott Bessent, a billionaire investor tapped to lead Trump’s Treasury Department, called extending Trump’s 2017 tax cuts that were largely unpopular with the majority of voters the “the single most important economic issue of the day.”

And Republicans were cheering them on.

Any opposition to Hegseth seemed to dissolve following his hearing before the Senate Armed Services panel. At the hearing, Hegseth, who faced allegations of sexual assault and excessive drinking that initially made him seem vulnerable, called himself a “change agent.” Hegseth denies the sexual assault claims, which were not prosecuted.

To the contrary, one Republican senator defended Hegseth from charges of drinking and infidelity by calling out his own colleagues for voting while drunk and getting divorced over cheating; another called Hegseth a “breath of fresh air.”

After the hearing, Sen. Joni Ernst (R-Iowa), who had expressed doubts about Hegseth before facing an intense pressure campaign from Trump allies, announced she would vote for him, effectively sealing his fate as Pentagon chief.

Armed Services Chairman Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi) said he planned to vote Hegseth out of committee next week, and a full Senate vote would probably come soon after.

While Bondi appears poised to become attorney general, Democratic senators’ intense focus in her hearing on Patel’s statements suggests his path could be more complicated. Bondi was asked several times to respond to Patel’s comments about shuttering the FBI building and turning it into a museum, as well as prosecuting journalists.

Patel has gained some key endorsements already, however, including from Sen. Thom Tillis (R-North Carolina) and Ernst.

Kennedy is also among those who still face a complicated confirmation process, with opposition lingering on both sides of the aisle. Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-Louisiana), a doctor who chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, has raised concerns about Kennedy’s track record as an [anti-vaccine activist](#).

On Wednesday, former vice president Mike Pence’s advocacy group, Advancing American Freedom, urged senators to vote against confirming Kennedy over his views favoring [abortion](#) rights.

“While RFK Jr. has made certain overtures to pro-life leaders that he would be mindful of their concerns at HHS,” the group wrote in their letter, “there is little reason for confidence at this time.”