

# Community Matters

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## US Senate Holds Confirmation Hearings

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Almost immediately upon assembling, Congress began holding confirmation hearings on President Obama's cabinet nominations. They usually wait until after the inauguration to begin, but Congressional leaders opened the process early, considering the dire condition of the country. The Constitution requires that certain presidential appointments occur with "the advice and consent of the Senate".

The president appoints thousands of people to government positions. More than 2,000 require Congressional confirmation. They include all cabinet secretaries, cabinet-level positions, and other department positions several steps down into the bureaucracy. The president may ask many of the people already holding those offices to remain in them, but that is his choice. Supreme Court justices and federal judges are appointed for life. The president makes those appointments only when there is a vacancy. Ambassadors and other positions required by law are also appointed.

It may take as much as a year to complete the all of the nominations and confirmations. The Senate considers the highest-level positions first. The process begins when a person is considered for a particular position. Individual names can come from two sources. A person can ask for a job, or someone else can recommend her/him. The president seeks advice from many sources including Senators, his staff, and trusted colleagues and friends. For the first time in 2008, a president-elect actively encouraged the public to apply for jobs in the new administration. The Obama-Biden Transition Team Web site, [www.change.gov](http://www.change.gov), included a job application page with instructions for job seekers. That same page now appears on the White House Web site, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

First, the people under consideration undergo rigorous examination of their affairs. The White House staff checks their personal, professional, and financial backgrounds for their qualifications and looks for any conflict of interest or illegal or unethical behavior in the past. Presidents don't like to be, but sometimes are, surprised when embarrassing things emerge in the confirmation hearings.

Once someone is formally nominated, the relevant Senate committee holds hearings to evaluate the nominee's credentials so that the members can form their own opinions. For example, the Foreign Relations Committee evaluates the nominee for Secretary of State, Judiciary Committee for Attorney General, and the Finance Committee for Treasury Secretary. Some committees are responsible for more than one cabinet department and some positions report to more than one committee. It's quite a job to keep track of it all. We see these hearings on the news reports. Committee staff members also conduct their own background investigations.

The committee chairs control the hearings. Since the Democrats hold the majority in the Senate, all committee chairs are Democrats. Lower-level nominees are usually confirmed with little or no difficulty, but the highest-level positions face the most scrutiny. The questioning can be quite intense. It's your worst nightmare of a job interview. The committee may interview other witnesses in addition to the nominee. C-Span TV televises the hearings, and news reports show portions of the most

important ones. Transcripts of the hearings are available to the public, although it may take several months for them to be ready.

After the hearings, the committee votes on whether to recommend that the full Senate confirm the nomination. The nomination can be marked up to the floor with a recommendation to confirm or deny the appointment, or with no recommendation either way. The process often involves personal and political favoritism and grudges. Majority Leader Sen. Harry Reid, D-NV, schedules the floor votes. Eventually, the full Senate votes to confirm or deny each appointment. If the appointment is denied, the president must nominate someone else and the process begins again.

To date, the Senate has confirmed nine of the fifteen cabinet secretaries. They are:

- Hillary Clinton, State
- Ken Salazar, Interior
- Tom Vilsack, Agriculture
- Ray LaHood, Transportation
- Steven Chu, Energy
- Arne Duncan, Education
- Eric Shinseki, Veterans Affairs
- Janet Napolitano, Homeland Security.

The Senate confirmed Secretary of Defense Robert Gates under former President Bush. He does not have to be confirmed again.

Confirmation is expected soon for:

- Tim Geithner, Treasury
- Eric Holder, Justice
- Hilda Solis, Labor
- Tom Daschle, Health & Human Services
- Shawn Donovan, Housing & Urban Development.

Obama has not yet named a replacement for Commerce Department Secretary, since Governor Bill Richardson, D-NM, withdrew from the nomination.

Pennsylvania Senator Robert Casey, D, Scranton, is a member of the Foreign Relations; Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry; and Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committees. Senator Arlen Specter, R- Philadelphia, sits on the Appropriation, Judiciary, and Veterans Affairs Committees.

I strongly recommend that you watch some of the hearings on C-Span II. It's quite an interesting process and can involve more drama than a soap opera.

For more information, go to: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), and [www.demconwatchblog.org](http://www.demconwatchblog.org).

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