

How important is the US Cabinet?

The United States Cabinet is a part of the executive branch of the U.S. federal government consisting of the heads of federal executive departments, of which there are currently fifteen.

The Cabinet was first set up by George Washington in 1791 during the first presidency. He felt that it was important to have a collection of all the leaders of the executive departments together in order to discuss important issues. However, the US Constitution does not give any significance to a cabinet, and indeed, one is never even mentioned anywhere within the document. However, Article II does state that the president "may require the opinion in writing of the principle officer in each of the executive departments upon any subject relating to the duties in their respective offices."

The one big factor which considerably limits the power of the Cabinet is the single-person executive. In effect, all power lies with the president, and therefore the Cabinet can only ever have a consultative role. However, with President George W Bush's Cabinet, high ranking members such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld exert considerable influence upon the president.

Unlike the UK governmental system, there is no notion of collective responsibility. This is because the Constitution mentions that each member should only give advice on matters relating to his own department. Therefore, cross-Cabinet discussions rarely ever take place.

Since the establishment of the Executive Office of the President (EXOP) in 1939, the power of the Cabinet has been further diluted. This is because the EXOP takes responsibility for many information gathering and consultative exercises on behalf of the president.

It can be argued, however, that the Cabinet is still a moderately important part of the US executive. It still has the role of bringing together the heads of the executive departments, whose job it is to advise the president. Traditionally the most powerful and relevant Cabinet members are the Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of Defence, and Attorney General. In recent years, the Secretary of Homeland Security has risen to a level of significance that is arguably closer to the "big four" than to the other cabinet offices. These five important members exert a considerable amount of influence on the executive and can change views and opinions as well as push for agendas that are beneficial to their departments.

As well as all of this, the Cabinet is also important when it comes to succession. The Constitution says that the vice president will take over if the president is killed or impeached. However, if this is not possible, then members of the Cabinet are eligible in a preset order to succeed to the presidency. This is why one member of the Cabinet is always held at a secret high-security location when the others are together at an important occasion,

such as the inauguration of the president. This is called the designated survivor.

In conclusion, while the Cabinet is important for some minor issues, its power and influence has been diluted in recent times, especially with the establishment of the EXOP and the relative unimportance that is assumed by the president in relation to holding Cabinet meetings. Therefore, the Cabinet is not very powerful at all, only holding a minor consultative and informational role within US politics.

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