

Analyse the claim that nowadays ‘the president’s cabinet performs no useful functions’.

Many people’s first impressions of the US cabinet can be deceiving, as it can put forward the idea that they bring both the administration and the bureaucracy together. A cabinet rank department’s role is to be responsible for areas of policy like, among many others, Defense, Education and Transport. Each of these departments is headed by a secretary who represents it in cabinet.

The president appoints these heads of departments, but these must be ratified by the senate.

The president’s cabinet are mainly responsible for providing the president with advice and carrying out his decisions. The cabinet has a membership of just over twenty, and includes such people as the heads of executive departments, e.g. Donald Rumsfeld who is the Secretary of Defense and Rod Paige the Secretary of Education. It can also include figures like the UN Ambassador and the Chief of Staff.

President’s, upon election, usually affirm that the cabinet assembled would become an important stage in all decision making, however, this rarely happens. Some presidents have strived for a cabinet that would work on the foundation of collective decision making.

Ultimately, the cabinet can only be as strong as the president allows it to become, this was iterated by president Abraham Lincoln when at the end of a cabinet meeting he stated ‘Seven noes, one aye – the ayes have it’ this shows that cabinet can be overruled at any time, some members of cabinet do not even have direct access to the president. This was shown in the Nixon era, as only John Mitchell had direct access to the president, while his colleagues could rarely get past presidential aides.

Some presidents however have used cabinet much more frequently, president Ronald Reagan, in only his first term, brought his cabinet together thirty seven times, president Carter also used cabinet fairly frequently during his terms as president. Cabinet can only play a limited role, there are, however, a number of reasons for this fundamentally advisory role.

The first reason is that the membership of cabinet is traditionally loose, as it includes the heads of departments as well others the presidents include.

Another reason is that, under the presidential terms of Clinton, cabinet became too large as it reached a number of twenty five. This may make it hard to function properly while also having personnel responsibilities overlap each other.

Cabinet members generally serve for short periods of time, such as between the years of 1945 and 1995 secretaries of state served for around, on average, thirty eight months to twenty eight months.

The fourth problem with cabinet is that, unlike their British counterparts, members do not hold any other official political positions other than those already governed to them by the government.

The fifth problem with US cabinet is that their loyalty can often be scrutinised and under check by the president who may only see that they are drawn to their own departments and related work.

As the president is the figure of authority, they can define the role and powers of cabinet members.

The final reason, as president Clinton once showed, cabinet members are not always selected to do the job, they may be picked for other reasons, for example, when Clinton selected his cabinet so that it would 'look like America'.

Cabinet does not usually play a decisive role in making any policy decisions, this function is usually performed by smaller informal groups, such as bilateral meetings where the president and cabinet member meet on a one-to-one basis.

The cabinet can also be considered or seen as fairly informal, due to the fact that cabinet meetings take place irregularly.

Since the 1933 New Deal there has been a huge increase in Federal government activity, it was also clear that the federal administration could not cope with this increase in activity, so the Brownlow committee in 1939 recommended a major reorganization of the executive branch.

Eight years later Congress passed the legislative reorganization act, this established the Executive Office of the President (EXOP).

The main function of EXOP is to improve the presidents control of the rest of the bureaucracy. Some have said that the US would now be ungovernable without EXOP. Presidents also place more trust within EXOP than they do with the heads of the federal bureaucracy, there are four apparent reasons for this.

Primarily, EXOP staff are more likely to know the president on a more personal basis compared to cabinet members who are usually appointed as they have an expertise in a given field.

Secondly, EXOP workers are more likely to remain loyal to the president, again, compared to cabinet members who are torn between the president and their own department.

The State Department is around about a mile from the White House, this is helpful when decisions are being made.

Finally, cabinet members are usually busy with commitments to their departments.

EXOP is broken down into different sections; these include the four main departments.

The first of these is the National Security Council (NSC), this department was formed in 1947 and its membership includes the president, vice-president, both the secretaries of state and defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Usage of the NSC is entirely dependant upon the president, for example, Henry Kissinger during the Nixon administration was a predominant figure.

Second is the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), this department has a staff of over five hundred. Its core functions are to draft executive orders, screen legislations and to monitor all rules and regulations issued by the federal bureaucracy.

The OMB also takes responsibility for creating the budget on behalf of the president. The third department is that of the White House Office (WHO), the WHO employs around four hundred members of staff and is responsible for the president's day-to-day running. This department control access to the president and can become very powerful in its own right, for example, Bush senior's Chief of Staff.

The fourth department is the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA), the CEA is purely an advisory body. It consist of senior economic staff from major universities whose views usually relate closely to the presidents.

EXOP has both its strengths and weaknesses.

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In times of crisis, such as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, there is a quick response. Secondly, it can take the burden off the president, for example, the WHO maintain a liaison with congress.

EXOP also gives the president control over implementation, e.g. the OMB prioritises spending after Congress approves the budget.

EXOP, however, has its weaknesses.

It has been both seen and shown that EXOP can become too powerful. This was shown in 1972 – 74 when Bob Halderman and JD Ehrlichmann ruled the Whitehouse and controlled all access to Nixon. It can again be shown by members of the NSC who can overshadow the secretary of state, e.g. 1976 – 80 J Carter.

Staffs of EXOP have a purely advisory role, they have no executive powers within the federal bureaucracy.

EXOP can also become too big, therefore becoming difficult to manage and control. Responses to this included increasing the size of the departments to help control the cabinet departments.

To conclude, I think from the evidence above it is clear that the Cabinet's role is dwindling, this can be accounted for by the increased use of EXOP. However the cabinet's role could be greater, but this is partially the choice of the president who must decide if he will find them useful.