

Diversity in the President's Cabinet

1. Discuss what different kinds of diversity there are within a population and make a list.

Lower taxes. Create jobs. Grow the economy. Politicians make a lot of campaign promises. Some are soon forgotten, some are impossible and some are fulfilled. One promise that Joe Biden made on the campaign trail prior to the 2020 US Presidential Election was that if he won, he would form the most diverse cabinet the country had ever seen and that it would reflect the diversity in the country. The previous "diversity record" was held by former President Barack Obama. People of color made up 42% of his cabinet.

What is the Presidential Cabinet?
The Cabinet consists of the heads of the executive departments in the federal government of the US. The members' principal job is to advise the president.

New presidents often need several months to complete their cabinets because each of the nominees has to go through a vetting and congressional approval process. After all, members of the legislative branch would prefer to have Cabinet members who support the same agenda as they themselves do. Although Biden's cabinet appointees have waited significantly longer for their Senate confirmations than many previous appointees, he managed to fill his core cabinet (16 members) within his first two months in office. Vice President Kamala Harris belongs to this group; however, the person holding this position does not require Senate approval.

How are Cabinet members confirmed?
After being nominated by the president, committees investigate the nominees and report back to the full Senate. In the hearings that follow, Senators have the opportunity to question the nominees on such things as character, qualifications and policy views. Only a simple majority in the Senate is needed for confirmation.

2. Find information and graphs on the internet about the population of the United States.

What do the demographics look like?

3. Biden had 16 cabinet positions to fill. Using your list of diversity from ex. 1 and the population information you found, divide up the cabinet positions. What groups should be represented to what extent?

Let's see how President Biden did compared to your calculations and his promise. Out of the 26 cabinet and cabinet-level positions, 12 of the members are women and 13 are people of color. There are five African Americans, one Native American, two of Asian or Pacific Islander descent, four Latinos and one of multiracial descent. One member of Biden's Cabinet is also the first presidential Cabinet member to openly belong to the LGBTQ community.



However, there are a few areas where the Cabinet lacks in diversity. The first category is age. The average age is 58.5. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg is the youngest at 39 and John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, is 77 and the oldest Cabinet member. On a side note, 78-year-old President Biden is the oldest US president ever to take office.

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Another category where diversity is lacking is people with disabilities. Approximately 25% of Americans identify as having some kind of disability and yet only 3% of Biden's appointees fit this category and it is unclear to whom this applies. The third category open to criticism is level and kind of education. While neither President Biden nor Vice-President Harris attended an Ivy League school (elite universities in the US such as Harvard, Yale or Princeton), almost half of his cabinet members did.

4. What is your opinion on these areas where diversity is lacking? Do you think they should be of concern? Which is the most worrisome for you? Why?

President Biden's Cabinet boasts at least 16 "firsts". One of these is Deb Haaland from New Mexico. She has been appointed as the Secretary of the Interior and is the first Native American Cabinet secretary. As the head of the Department of the Interior, she is responsible for overseeing the 500 million+ acres of public lands, such as the 423 national park sites. In addition, she is in charge of administering programs for the 550 Native American tribes which are officially recognized by the federal government. The work of her department (where about 77,000 people are employed) is varied and widespread. Environmental topics such as the protection of endangered species and the conservation of natural resources are also part of her job description. More specific examples include managing water resources in the western United States and reclaiming abandoned mine sites. Haaland's department also heads the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education, which in turn is responsible for some 180 tribal schools.



While to an outsider Haaland would appear to be a well-qualified candidate for the job (she's a lawyer, climate activist and has served two terms in the House of Representatives), her Senate confirmation was one of the closest – it was a 51-to-40 vote – with only four Republican senators voting in her favor. According to news reports, senators from the Republican party almost exclusively asked questions about Haaland's personal stance on oil and gas extraction, instead

of how she would address tribal issues, such as sovereignty and supporting Indigenous communities. One senator from a western state said that since Haaland is against fracking and objected to plans for a big oil pipeline in the West, she is unsuitable to oversee energy development on public lands. In reply, Haaland emphasized that being Secretary of the Interior is not about promoting her own opinions or the interests of her home state but rather the policies of the Biden administration.

5. Why do you think the subject of oil and gas extraction is so important to some senators?

6. Find some of the other "firsts" in Biden's cabinet. Choose one and write a short text highlighting the significance of the Cabinet appointment.

7. To what extent is diversity among politicians important in a representative democracy? Compare the diversity in President Biden's Cabinet to that of the German Federal Government.


1. Kinds of diversity can include: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, level of education, disabilities, economic status, age.
2. Every ten years a census is taken by the US Census Bureau. This is a good place to start looking for statistics.
3. Here students can look, for example, to see whether two or more minority groups can be represented by one person. A female African American who identifies with the LGBTQ community?

This page has a good graph comparing US demographics to Biden's Cabinet:

Analysis: What does Biden's diverse Cabinet mean for a divided country - CNNPolitics

<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/18/politics/diversity-joe-biden-cabinet-analysis/index.html> 

This page offers a good overview of the diversity in Biden's Cabinet (race and ethnicity, gender, age): **America's New Leaders - CNN.com**

<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/01/politics/us-cabinet-2021-demographics/> 

4. Age: Older cabinet members can be seen as an enrichment based on their many years of experience in the political arena and may act as mentors to younger members. However, older cabinet members could also be seen as not being dynamic enough, lacking an understanding of the younger population, close-minded to political innovations.

Disabilities: This area is the most worrisome for me. People with disabilities have special needs and need an appropriate platform with fair representation.

Education: Just because someone attended an Ivy League university doesn't mean that they are "elite" in the negative sense of the word. Someone with a working-class background could have made their way to one of these universities, so why should they be "punished" for that?

List of Ivy League universities: Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, Yale University

5. Senators from certain states receive money from lobbyists connected with the oil and gas industries. Therefore, it is important to these senators to fight for those interests because they are probably also important to their constituents. This is especially vital if there are upcoming elections.
6. This article lists a collection of Biden's "firsts":

Biden's first 100 days: How diverse is the administration? (19thnews.org)

<https://19thnews.org/2021/04/biden-promised-the-most-diverse-administration-ever-heres-how-hes-doing/> 