

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

Progressive Cabinet Project

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SECRETARY OF STATE

Portfolio Description: The Department of State is perhaps the most visible and prestigious of any cabinet departments. The department presides over a wide array of tasks relating to the United States's external affairs, including representing America abroad and advising the President on matters of foreign policy. Whoever is chosen for the role under a progressive administration must prioritize multilateralism, non-interventionism, and a commitment to arms control and climate change alleviation. Choosing a Secretary of State will be a difficult task for any left-wing President compared to appointing heads of agencies with domestic purviews. This is because anti-interventionist stalwarts have been largely absent in diplomatic circles and in top foreign policy think tanks such as the Council on Foreign Relations, whose membership are often chosen for State Department positions.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of State has been perhaps the biggest casualty of the right-wing effort to dismantle the federal government. Morale among the Department's personnel is at an all-time low, particularly among trained foreign service officers, the backbone of the agency. Key positions have been given to lackeys, including multiple alumni of Fox News, at the expense of qualified civil servants. Under the Trump Administration, the Department of State has pursued an interventionist policy overseas, favoring regime change in countries like Venezuela and Iran. Diplomatic positions have been effectively "sold" to wealthy donors.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of State has largely functioned in a competent manner and has participated in international initiatives such as the historic Paris Accord. However, while the department's personnel were generally qualified, many prominent figures within the Department of State were far too interventionist. As with Republicans, diplomatic positions were often "sold" to wealthy donors.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of State would pursue initiatives aimed at bringing peace to destabilized regions rather than embarking upon nation-building efforts. The department's personnel would be composed of career foreign service officers and policy experts intimately familiar with what it would take to build a more peaceful world order. Diplomatic positions would be given out on the basis of expertise on a particular foreign policy subject area, not on the basis of wealth or personal proximity to the president and his party.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Portfolio Description: The powerful Department of Defense is the most prestigious of agencies with tasks related to national security. Constituting the single largest employer in the world, “the Pentagon” supervises America’s armed forces and advises the president on issues relating to military intervention. Whoever is chosen for the role under a progressive administration must be committed to a principle of non-interventionism, diplomacy over brute strength, and the disarmament of nuclear and hypersonic weapons. As with choosing a Secretary of State, choosing a Secretary of Defense will be a challenge for a left-wing president since ideological non-interventionists are largely absent in top military capacities or even among elected officials qualified for the position.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Defense’s already obscene budget has been increased. Key positions within the Department have been doled out to Trump loyalists, Republican donors, and defense lobbyists. The Department’s leadership has coordinated with private military companies like Blackwater to effectively privatize certain operations. Additionally, the Pentagon has transferred funds to Trump’s pet project: A “wall” on the U.S. - Mexico border. Additionally, despite the Pentagon’s assessment of climate change as a major national security threat, the Department has neglected to pursue policies to adapt to the climate crisis.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of Defense has generally been staffed by qualified national security officials. However, even as minor cuts were proposed, previous Democratic presidents have not been vigilant enough about cutting the Department’s obscene budget. Additionally, the Department has too often been staffed by individuals as supportive of interventionism as their Republican counterparts.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of Defense’s budget would be significantly reduced, with its extraneous funding directed to social programs. The Department would be staffed by highly-qualified civil servants who see military intervention as an absolute last resort, not the default M.O. of U.S. foreign policy.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Portfolio Description: Headed by the Attorney General, the Department of Justice is the chief federal law enforcement agency. With a purview that includes governance of the federal prison system, reviewing the conduct of local law enforcement agencies, and investigating cases of fraud, the department's enviable prestige is proportionate to its range of responsibilities. Whoever is chosen as Attorney General under a left-wing president must come into office with a serious commitment to criminal justice reform and a will to prosecute cases of fraud in the financial sector.

Under Donald Trump,

the “Department of Justice” has become anything but. Under Attorneys General Jeff Sessions and William Barr, the Department of Justice has persecuted immigrants and infringed upon the ability of states to protect their migrant communities. The Department of Justice withdrew prior agency directives protecting the LGBTQ+ community, the ability of states to effectively set their own marijuana policies, and those that urged local prosecutors not to impose excessive fines on poor defendants, among many cruel policies. The Department has been corrupted by the appointment of Trump loyalists at the expense of qualified civil servants.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of Justice has been responsible for making strides to protect marginalized communities, particularly LGBTQ+ Americans. Despite this, past Democratic administrations have largely leaned on corporate law alumni to fill agency positions, and unsurprisingly this resulted in little accountability for banks responsible for the 2008 financial crisis. Meaningful pushes for criminal justice reform have been limited and serious efforts for more rigorous antitrust policies have largely been sidelined.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of Justice would be staffed with highly-qualified public servants, labor lawyers, civil rights attorneys, and legal academics rather than BigLaw as was the case in the past. Major financial firms would face punishment for impropriety and the rights of marginalized communities would be codified into law.

SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY

Portfolio Description: The Department of the Treasury is legally authorized to collect government revenue, advises the president on and gives suggestions to Congress about fiscal policy, and manages U.S. debt instruments. Whoever serves as Secretary of the Treasury under a left-wing administration must be committed to the use of government intervention in the economy to prevent recessions and alleviate inequality.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of the Treasury has been staffed by unqualified donors and right-wing economists with little regard for the welfare of working families. Department leadership has pursued tax cuts for the rich at the expense of relief for the poor and indebted. The moderate financial regulations put in place by prior Democratic administrations have been largely gutted. Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin has been a disaster for working people in the United States and abroad, helping to sabotage the International Monetary Fund's attempt at coordinating a global response to coronavirus pandemic.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of the Treasury has largely been staffed with investment bankers and alumni of multinational financial firms, not unlike the Department under Republican rule.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of the Treasury would be staffed with progressive economists and financial regulation experts committed to redistributive policies rather than corporate actors eager to return to the private sector.

SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

Portfolio Description: Sometimes sardonically referred to as “the Department of Everything Else” owing to its wide array of responsibilities, the Department of the Interior is primarily tasked with the conservation of America’s natural resources. The department oversees about three quarters of American federal land and additionally serves to provide crucial programs to Native American communities. The Secretary of the Interior is typically a politician hailing from a state west of the Mississippi River, and it is particularly common for the secretary to have prior experience as Governor. Under a progressive administration, the primary task of the Secretary of the Interior should be to halt any plans for the privatization of America’s national parks and other federally-owned lands.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of the Interior has effectively ceased its mission of protecting America’s natural resources. Since Trump’s inauguration, the Department of the Interior has scaled back or privatized America’s national parks and monuments, legalized the use of lead bullets in wildlife refuges against the advice of every environmental group, and retaliated against Department employees who spoke out about climate change. Federal land operated by the Department has been opened up for the purpose of resource extraction and the Bureau of Indian Affairs has seen its funding cut.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of the Interior has generally served its intended purpose. However, the Department of the Interior under Obama was headed by moderate Senator Ken Salazar, an ally of the petroleum industry, who despite approving the creation of new national parks also signed off on the creation of various offshore drilling projects. Given the scope of the climate crisis, it is imperative that the new Secretary of the Interior in a Democratic administration is a committed ally of the environmental movement.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of the Interior would be staffed by scientists and highly-qualified alumni of conservationist organizations. The Department would seek massive expansions of federal land, increased protections for endangered species, and increased funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

Portfolio Description: As its name suggests, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) is primarily tasked with the development and execution of laws pertaining to agricultural activity. A progressive approach to federal agriculture policy would include challenging agricultural monopolies and promoting sustainable agribusiness programs, among other initiatives. What often goes without mention, however, is that 80% of the department's funding goes toward the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), a sub-cabinet agency responsible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or “food stamp” program). As such, it is imperative that a Secretary of Agriculture under a left-wing administration will be as committed to preserving and expanding the welfare state as they are to taking on agricultural monopolies that have devastated rural communities across the country.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Agriculture has been stocked with agribusiness lobbyists beholden to the interests of major firms like Dow and Monsanto. The department's conservative and often unqualified personnel have sabotaged the SNAP program that millions of families rely on, and the agency's mismanagement has led to an exodus of scientists at a time when they're needed most.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of Agriculture has largely functioned in a competent manner with programs like SNAP being administered effectively. However, even under Democrats the agency has been seen itself stocked with lobbyists and agribusiness alumni naturally uninterested in challenging agricultural monopolies.

Under a progressive administration,

the department would be staffed with highly qualified individuals, particularly those with scientific experience. The Department would facilitate the creation of policies aimed at challenging the grip of major agribusiness firms, the expansion of the SNAP program, and the agency's efforts to prepare and adjust farmers to the realities of climate change.

SECRETARY OF COMMERCE

Portfolio Description: The Department of Commerce is responsible for setting industrial standards, curating some vital economic statistics, and promoting sustainable economic growth. In past administrations, choices to lead the department have generally been major donors to presidential campaigns without any prior public experience: Billionaire Hyatt heiress Penny Pritzker, Edison International CEO John Bryson, Kellogg CEO Carlos Gutierrez, and WL Ross & Co. founder Wilbur Ross are among the list of recent Secretaries of Commerce with no public experience prior to their appointments. Given that any left-wing president is unlikely to have won with the backing of titans of industry, choosing a Secretary of Commerce will presumably be based on other criteria, such as commitment to sustainable growth policies that result in less economic inequality.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Commerce has become completely dysfunctional. Billionaire Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross is said to sleep during meetings, leading the rest of the agency's personnel to schedule briefings without the Secretary present. When Ross has been lucid, he has spent his time threatening to fire scientists at the agency's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration unless they revise weather predictions that contradict Trump's, implementing the exclusionary census reform proposal designed to intimidate immigrants, and implementing irresponsible tariffs to provoke a trade war.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the agency has unfortunately been staffed with wealthy donors uninterested in actual governance. Under Obama, billionaire heiress Penny Pritzker served in the role, using the position to push through the disastrous Trans-Pacific Partnership proposal before returning to the private sector.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of Commerce, particularly its constituent Economic Development Administration (EDA), would be tasked with creating and coordinating sound industrial policy aimed at inclusive growth and the alleviation of inequality. The Department would be staffed with qualified professionals intimately familiar with economic development rather than wealthy donors looking to cash-in by adding government experience to their resumé. Needless to say, a Department of Commerce under a progressive administration would never administer exclusionary census reforms.

SECRETARY OF LABOR

Portfolio Description: The Department of Labor is tasked with executing laws related to worker safety and employment rights, as well as administering unemployment benefits and presiding over the curation of economic statistics. Under a progressive administration, the Secretary of Labor should be very friendly towards organized labor, committed to protecting the rights of working people, and in support of the expansion of the welfare state to support impoverished workers and those faced with unemployment.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Labor has effectively become, as one columnist succinctly put it, the “Department of Employer’s Rights”. The Department of Labor has rolled back efforts by the Obama Administration to extend overtime protections to workers deemed “supervisors”, rescinded the “persuader rule” that forced employers to disclose relationships with union-busting lawyers, and has generally taken a hands-off approach to enforcing labor regulations.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of Labor has generally served its stated purpose. Despite this, previous Democratic administrations have generally underemphasized the role of the Department and neglected to include the Secretary of Labor in their inner circle. Additionally, the Department of Labor, which has regulatory authority over pension funds, gave waivers to big banks guilty of conspiracy to effectively rig the foreign-exchange market under the leadership of Secretary Tom Perez.

Under a progressive administration,

the Secretary of Labor would be one of the highest positions in the executive branch and would be a key member of the president’s inner circle on matters of social and economic policy.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Portfolio Description: The Department of Health and Human Services is tasked with the administration and provision of public health services. Component agencies include the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (which administers the Medicaid and Medicare programs), the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (which serves to protect public health and safety), and the Food and Drug Administration (which controls and supervises food and drug safety standards). Under a progressive administration, the department will be given the crucial task of implementing a national healthcare service.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Health and Human Services has abandoned any ostensible commitment to securing better health outcomes for Americans. The Department has been staffed by health insurance and pharmaceutical industry lobbyists at the expense of qualified healthcare professionals. The protections to individuals with pre-existing conditions have been undercut and the Department has worked diligently to punish abortion providers whenever possible. The federal government's abysmal response to the COVID-19 pandemic has displayed the incompetence of the Department's right-wing leadership.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of Health and Human Services has also been stocked with corporate alumni, with the former president of the Walmart Foundation serving at the helm of the Department from 2014 to 2017. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius notably vetoed an order by the Food and Drug Administration to expand access to Plan B, the first time in history the Department overruled scientific determination from the FDA.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of Health and Human Services would be staffed by medical doctors, scientists, and public health experts committed to securing a healthier and more prosperous United States via universal health insurance.

SECRETARY OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Portfolio Description: The Department of Housing and Urban Development is primarily concerned with the regulation of affordable and supportive housing programs. Under a progressive administration, the department should be committed to ending the national housing crisis via increased funding for affordable housing and via zoning reform.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department has been led by Ben Carson, a man with prior no experience in any issue related to housing administration. Under his leadership, Carson has signed onto plans to evict undocumented immigrants from public housing in addition to plans to reduce the Department's funding for public housing as a whole. While the Department has been generally neglected by presidents from both parties, it should be noted that the Republican Party has a history of appointing individuals with no experience of expertise in housing policy to top agency positions.

Under previous Democratic administrations,

the Department has generally received similar disinterest from the executive office. The Department's policy responses to the Great Recession, ostensibly to relieve homeowners, did little more than speed up the rapid rate of selling of poor people's houses to the benefit of private equity firms.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department will no longer be a refuge for minor politicians too inexperienced for a separate federal role or wealthy campaign donors. Instead, a progressive administration will recognize the potential the Department has in coordinating sound housing policy to guarantee housing as a fundamental human right, including fully investing in environmentally-sound public housing.

SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION

Portfolio Description: The Department of Transportation is concerned with all matters related to transportation, from providing support to local transit systems, enforcing rail safety laws, and regulating the construction of highways. Under a progressive administration, the department should place particular emphasis on investing in local transit systems and rebuilding antiquated transport infrastructure. Traditionally, the post has often (but far from exclusively) been held by municipal officials in Democratic administrations.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Transportation has been treated with neglect similar to most agencies. Since 2017, the Department has been headed by Elaine Chao, who has used the position to flagrantly enrich her and her family. In addition to Chao's obvious ethical issues, she has used the position to push for the privatization of numerous Department functions, particularly the Federal Aviation Administration. In addition to Chao, the agency is currently staffed by numerous individuals with no apparent interest let alone expertise in transportation policy, with acting Deputy Secretary Steven Bradbury's primary distinction being his history of penning legal memos justifying the use of torture on detainees.

Under previous Democratic administrations,

the Department has received little interest from the Executive Office. Despite the importance of the agency and the impact sound transportation policy can have, Barack Obama appointed Republican Congressman Ray LaHood, a Republican with no expertise in transportation policy, to lead the Department. Given the massive Senate Majority available to Obama at the time of appointment, it is simply unconscionable that the position was seen as "disposable" enough to give to an unqualified Republican as a symbolic gesture.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of Transportation would be staffed with transportation professionals committed to repairing America's crumbling transportation infrastructure and investing in alternate methods of travel, particularly trail, to ease America's reliance on the environmentally damaging automobile.

SECRETARY OF ENERGY

Portfolio Description: The Department of Energy presides over a wide array of crucial functions related to the regulation of America’s energy systems. The often-overlooked agency is responsible for the regulation of the federal nuclear weapons program in addition to presiding over research and policy recommendations related to domestic energy production. In a progressive administration, the Secretary of Energy should be tasked first and foremost with coordinating efforts to respond to the climate crisis with other department heads and prioritizing the use of department funds to support research into alternative energy sources.

Under Donald Trump,

the position of Secretary of Energy was infamously given to former Texas Governor Rick Perry, an advocate of abolishing the Department of Energy. Perry, a climate change denier and ally of the petroleum industry, used the position to promote the environmentally disastrous coal power and most disturbingly suggested that the expansion of the oil industry could be key in preventing sexual assault. In addition to Perry, the Department has been stocked with other fossil fuel industry alumni, with the current Under Secretary of Energy being a former vice president of Berkshire Hathaway Energy who uses the term “freedom gas” to describe petroleum.

Under previous Democratic administrations,

the Department has been genuinely staffed with competent professionals. However, neither of Barack Obama’s Secretaries of Energy were visible enough as advocates for renewable energy and against America’s reliance on fossil fuels.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department would be staffed with qualified energy professionals committed to a carbon-neutral economy by 2030 in order to prevent climate catastrophe.

SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

Portfolio Description: The Department of Education presides over the highly decentralized U.S. education system, administering Pell grants and the Federal Direct Student Loan Program among other programs. Whoever serves as Secretary of Education in a progressive administration should have public education experience and should be committed to protecting public education and ending the student loan debt crisis.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Education has been led by billionaire Betsy DeVos, one of America's foremost opponents of public education. Under DeVos's leadership, established student debt relief programs have been effectively sabotaged, protections for LGBTQ+ students have been rolled back, and efforts to combat campus sexual assault has been largely ceased.

Under past Democratic administrations,

the Department of Education has unfortunately been led by individuals with little commitment to public education or ending the student debt crisis. Under Barack Obama, Arne Duncan, one of the foremost advocates of charter schools in America, was given free reign as head of the department to push his agenda.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department of Education would be staffed by education professionals, particularly those with direct personal experience as K-12 teachers. The Department of Education's in-house policy team would work on ways to combat the increasing charter-ization of America's public schools as well as plans to relieve student loan debt in the wake of a massive debt crisis among college graduates.

SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Portfolio Description: The Department of Veterans Affairs is the department involved with administering healthcare and other benefits to veterans of the armed forces. Perpetually in a state of crisis, a Secretary of Veterans Affairs in a progressive administration will be tasked with fighting attempts to privatize various functions of the constituent Veterans Health Administration in the face of Republican onslaught.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Veterans Affairs has been staffed with proponents of privatizing the department's critical functions, particularly those of the Veterans Health Administration. Given that the Veterans Health Administration is an effective healthcare provider that provides a model for a future national healthcare system, plans for privatization would be disastrous for America's veterans.

Under previous Democratic administrations,

the affairs of the Department of Veterans Affairs have been largely ignored by an uninterested executive office. The appointment of Eric Shinseki, a retired general and member of the Guardian Life Insurance board of directors who had no direct experience in healthcare administration, culminated in disaster in 2014 and led to his replacement by Republican Procter & Gamble CEO Robert McDonald.

Under a progressive administration,

the Department would be staffed top-to-bottom by seasoned healthcare professionals interested in securing the best possible care for America's veterans and fighting off any efforts by private enterprises to profiteer off its functions.

SECRETARY OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Portfolio Description: The newest of all cabinet departments, the Department of Homeland Security is the paramount anti-terrorism agency in the federal government. While many progressives would like the department to be done with altogether, in the meantime a progressive administration's Secretary of Homeland Security should be someone committed to upholding privacy laws and cracking down on the abuse of detainees. Furthermore, as it administers the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) sub-cabinet agency, a Secretary of Homeland Security in a progressive administration should be committed to ending the abuse of detained migrants.

Under Donald Trump,

the Department of Homeland Security has committed widespread human rights abuses against immigrants. Under the leadership of Secretary John Kelly, the Department of Homeland Security implemented Trump's exclusionary Muslim Ban. His successor, Kirstjen Nielsen, oversaw the cruel separation of detained immigrant children from their families and the deployment of tear gas at the border.

Under the previous Democratic administration,

the Department of Homeland Security was not responsible for the same level of egregious offenses as it is under Trump. However, it must be remembered that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency's inhumane treatment of detainees is not something that began with Trump. As such, it is necessary for the next Democratic President to appoint a Secretary of Homeland Security serious about ending the abuse of detained immigrants.

Under a progressive administration,

the rights of immigrants, both documented and undocumented, would be respected and children would not be separated from their parents. The exclusionary Muslim Ban would be overturned and the illegal surveillance of Muslim Americans would be discontinued. The systematic overreach we've seen from intelligence agencies over the past two decades, such as increased social media and satellite surveillance, would be challenged from the top-down by a Secretary of Homeland Security interested in protecting privacy rights.