

# Senate confirms former ExxonMobil CEO as secretary of state

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The US Senate voted Wednesday afternoon to confirm Rex Tillerson, longtime CEO of ExxonMobil, as secretary of state, the top US diplomatic representative. The vote was 56-43, largely along party lines, with three Democrats and one Democratic-aligned independent joining all 52 Republicans.

Tillerson will take office with the weakest support in the Senate of any secretary of state in US history. The previous low in modern history was Condoleezza Rice, confirmed by a vote of 86-13 in 2005. Obama's two secretaries of state were confirmed by near-unanimous votes, 94-2 for Hillary Clinton and 94-3 for John Kerry.

The significant vote against Tillerson is not a signal of any opposition by the Democratic Party to the right-wing rampage unleashed by President Trump since his inauguration January 20. The main Democratic criticism of Tillerson was from the right, denouncing him as soft on Russia because of his longstanding business ties to the world's largest oil producer.

In two hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and in floor debate on the nomination, Democrats also attacked Trump's conciliatory statements about Russian President Vladimir Putin and again cited claims of "Russian hacking" of the Democrats during the 2016 US presidential election, although there is no evidence that the embarrassing material released by WikiLeaks was actually supplied by the Russian government.

Tillerson will take charge of a State Department that has been thrown into turmoil by the executive order signed by Trump January 27 banning all refugees for 90 days, as well as visitors from seven majority-Muslim countries that have been bombed by the United States or subjected to economic sanctions.

More than 1,000 State Department career employees have signed a "dissent cable" opposing the executive

order as cruel and inhumane, and damaging to US foreign policy interests. White House spokesman Sean Spicer has suggested that those diplomats "should either get with the program or they can go."

Ryan C. Crocker, a former US ambassador to five Muslim countries, including Iraq during the height of the Bush administration's war and occupation, told the *New York Times*, "Tillerson faces the most difficult task of any secretary of state in the postwar era in trying to reconcile President Trump's intention to make a stark break from decades of bipartisan consensus US foreign policy leadership with the reality that, if he succeeds, such a break could lead to global chaos."

Other Trump cabinet nominations continue to advance in the Senate, with the Republican majority brushing aside impotent and largely theatrical protests by the Democrats, who would happily confirm the vast majority of the nominees but fear the popular reaction. These fears have multiplied after mass nationwide demonstrations January 21 against Trump's inauguration were followed by a weekend of protests January 28-29 at US airports against the initial detentions of visitors and refugees under the terms of Trump's Muslim ban.

On Tuesday, Senate Democrats blocked committee votes on three nominees: Senator Jeff Sessions for Attorney General, Steven Mnuchin as secretary of treasury, and Congressman Tom Price to head the Department of Health and Human Services. But Senate Republicans regrouped and pushed through all three nominations Wednesday.

The Senate Judiciary Committee approved Sessions by a party-line 11-9 vote and sent his nomination to the floor of the Senate. The Senate Finance Committee, acting in the absence of the Democrats who boycotted the meeting to block the vote, suspended rules that

require at least one member of the minority to be present to constitute a quorum. The committee then rubber-stamped the Mnuchin and Price nominations by identical 14-0 votes.

Democrats boycotted another confirmation hearing Wednesday, this one for Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, nominated to head the Environmental Protection Agency—against which he has filed numerous lawsuits on behalf of oil and gas polluters. Pruitt's nomination was held over for another day.

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee delayed a vote on Congressman Mick Mulvaney, nominated to Office of Management and Budget, to allow more time to review background material, but a vote to confirm will place on Thursday without further procedural obstacles.

Three other nominations—Congressman Ryan Zinke of Montana to head the Department of Interior, former Texas Governor Rick Perry to head the Department of Energy and billionaire Betsy DeVos to head the Department of Education—were approved by committees Tuesday and now await final confirmation votes by the full Senate. Zinke and Perry had substantial Democratic support in the committee votes and will be confirmed easily by the full Senate.

Only the confirmation of DeVos is in question. Her committee testimony was such a devastating display of ignorance and opposition to public education that two Republican senators, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, announced their opposition in speeches on the Senate floor Wednesday. At least one other Republican, Dan Sullivan of Alaska, suggested his support was in doubt.

Given the 52-48 Republican majority, two Republicans joining all the Democrats would produce a 50-50 tie, requiring Vice President Mike Pence to cast the tie-breaking vote. Senate Republican leaders were compelled to delay the floor vote to confirm Senator Jeff Sessions as attorney general because his vote as a senator might be needed to save the DeVos nomination.

While Democratic opposition has been hyped endlessly, both by the Democrats themselves and by the Trump White House, each for their own political reasons, the real attitude of the Democratic Party to the Trump administration was expressed in comments by Representative Adam Schiff, the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and one of the most

adamant voices in the campaign over alleged Russian hacking.

Speaking with the *Los Angeles Times*, Schiff worried that the ultra-right actions and statements of the Trump administration were “radicalizing Democrats,” and that the party’s main task was to keep the protests against the new government under control.

“The radical nature of this government is radicalizing Democrats,” he said, “and that’s going to pose a real challenge to the Democratic Party, which is to draw on the energy and the activism and the passion that is out there, but not let it turn us into what we despised about the tea party.”

He voiced concern over an escalating political polarization. “The more radical the administration is, the more radicalized our base becomes, which just feeds the Breitbart crowd, and who knows where that ends,” he said. “I’ve never been more worried about the country’s future than I am right now.”

The unstated conclusion is that the Democrats are concerned about a political movement from below, sparked by both the attacks of the Trump administration and the spineless capitulation of the Democratic Party, that threatens all the institutions of American capitalism.



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