

Trump claims not to know who is behind Project 2025. A CNN review found at least 140 people who worked for him are involved

 [cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/trump-allies-project-2025/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/trump-allies-project-2025/index.html)

By Steve Contorno, CNN

July 11, 2024

CNN —

Donald Trump has lately made clear he wants little to do with Project 2025, the conservative blueprint for the next Republican president that has attracted considerable blowback in his race for the White House.

“I have no idea who is behind it,” the former president recently claimed on social media.

Many people Trump knows quite well are behind it.

Six of his former Cabinet secretaries helped write or collaborated on the 900-page playbook for a second Trump term published by the Heritage Foundation. Four individuals Trump nominated as ambassadors were also involved, along with several enforcers of his controversial immigration crackdown. And about 20 pages are credited to his first deputy chief of staff.

In fact, at least 140 people who worked in the Trump administration had a hand in Project 2025, a CNN review found, including more than half of the people listed as authors, editors and contributors to “Mandate for Leadership,” the project’s extensive manifesto for overhauling the executive branch.

Dozens more who staffed Trump’s government hold positions with conservative groups advising Project 2025, including his former chief of staff Mark Meadows and longtime adviser Stephen Miller. These groups also include several lawyers deeply involved in Trump’s attempts to remain in power, such as his impeachment attorney Jay Sekulow and two of the legal architects of his failed bid to overturn the 2020 presidential election, Cleta Mitchell and John Eastman.

To quantify the scope of the involvement from Trump’s orbit, CNN reviewed online biographies, LinkedIn profiles and news clippings for more than 1,000 people listed on published directories for the 110 organizations on Project 2025’s advisory board, as well as the 200-plus names credited with working on “Mandate for Leadership.”

Overall, CNN found nearly 240 people with ties to both Project 2025 and to Trump, covering nearly every aspect of his time in politics and the White House – from day-to-day foot soldiers in Washington to the highest levels of his government. The number is

likely higher because many individuals' online résumés were not available.

In addition to people who worked directly for Trump, others who participated in Project 2025 were appointed by the former president to independent positions. For instance, Federal Communications Commissioner Brendan Carr authored an entire chapter of proposed changes to his agency, and Lisa Correnti, an anti-abortion advocate Trump appointed as a delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, is among the contributors.

Several people involved in Project 2025 didn't serve in the Trump administration but were influential in shaping his first term. One example is former US Attorney Brett Tolman, a leading force behind the former president's criminal justice reform law who later helped arrange a pardon for Charles Kushner, the father of Trump's son-in-law. Tolman is listed as a contributor to "Mandate for Leadership."

The extensive overlap between Project 2025 and Trump's universe of allies, advisers and former staff complicates his efforts to distance himself from the work. Trump's campaign has sought for months to make clear that Project 2025 doesn't speak for them amid an intensifying push by President Joe Biden and Democrats to tie the Republican standard bearer to the playbook's more controversial policies.

In a statement to CNN, campaign spokeswoman Danielle Alvarez said Trump only endorses the Republican Party platform and the agenda posted on the former president's website.

"Team Biden and the (Democratic National Committee) are lying and fear-mongering because they have nothing else to offer the American people," Alvarez said.

Heritage plan becomes a political headache

Behind Project 2025 is the Heritage Foundation, a 51-year-old conservative organization that aligned itself with Trump not long after his 2016 victory. Heritage is led by Kevin Roberts, a Trump ally whom the former president praised as "doing an unbelievable job" on a February night when they shared the same stage.

Heritage conceived Project 2025 to begin planning so a Republican president could hit the ground running after the election. One of its priorities is creating a roadmap for the first 180 days of the new administration to quickly reorient every federal agency around its conservative vision. Described on its website as "a movement-wide effort guided by the conservative cause to address and reform the failings of big government and an undemocratic administrative state," Project 2025 also aims to recruit and train thousands of people loyal to the conservative movement to fill federal government positions.

One organization advising Project 2025, American Accountability Foundation, is also putting together a roster of current federal workers it suspects could impede Trump's plans for a second term. Heritage is paying the group \$100,000 for its work.

Many of Project 2025's priorities are aligned with the former president, especially on immigration and purging the federal bureaucracies. Both Trump and Project 2025 have called for eliminating the Department of Education.

But Project 2025 has lately become a lightning rod for other ideas Trump hasn't explicitly backed. Within "Mandate for Leadership" are plans to ban pornography, reverse federal approval of the abortion pill mifepristone, exclude the morning-after pill and men's contraceptives from coverage mandated under the Affordable Care Act, make it harder for transgender adults to transition, and eliminate the federal agency that oversees the National Weather Service.

Its voluminous and detailed plans also run counter to Trump's desire for a streamlined GOP platform absent any language that Democrats could wield against Republicans this cycle.

Roberts recently faced backlash as well for saying in an interview that the country was "in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be."

Three days later, Trump posted to Truth Social: "I know nothing about Project 2025."

"I disagree with some of the things they're saying and some of the things they're saying are absolutely ridiculous and abysmal," he wrote.

In response to Trump's social media post, a Project 2025 spokesperson told CNN in a statement it "does not speak for any candidate or campaign."

"It is ultimately up to that president, who we believe will be President Trump, to decide which recommendations to use," the spokesperson said.

Trump's campaign has repeatedly said in recent months that "reports about personnel and policies that are specific to a second Trump Administration are purely speculative and theoretical" and don't represent the former president's plans. Project 2025 and similar policy proposals coming from outside Trump's campaign are "merely suggestions," campaign managers Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita wrote in a statement.

Vast network of Trump allies

However, Trump's attempts to distance himself from Project 2025 have already encountered credibility challenges. The person overseeing Project 2025, Paul Dans, was a top official in Trump's White House who has previously said he hopes to work for his former boss again. Shortly after Trump's Truth Social post last week, Democrats noted a recruitment video for Project 2025 features a Trump campaign spokeswoman. On Tuesday, the Biden campaign posted dozens of examples of connections between Trump and Project 2025.

CNN's review of Project 2025's contributors also demonstrated the breadth of Trump's reach through the upper ranks of the vast network of organizations working to move the country in a conservative direction – from women's groups and Christian colleges to conservative think tanks in Texas, Alabama and Mississippi.

New organizations centered around Trump's political movement, his conspiracy theories around his electoral defeats and his first-term policies are deeply involved in Project 2025 as well. One of the advisory groups, America First Legal, was started by Miller, a key player in forming Trump's immigration agenda. Another is the Center for Renewing America, founded by Russ Vought, former acting director of the Office of Management and Budget, who wrote for Project 2025 a detailed blueprint for consolidating executive power.

Vought recently oversaw the Republican Party committee that drafted the new platform heavily influenced by Trump.

In addition to Vought, two other former Trump Cabinet secretaries wrote chapters for "Mandate for Leadership": Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson and acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller. Three more former department heads – National Intelligence Director John Ratcliffe, acting Transportation Secretary Steven Bradbury and acting Labor Secretary Patrick Pizzella – are listed as contributors.

Project 2025's proposals for reforming the country's immigration laws appear heavily influenced by those who helped execute Trump's early enforcement measures. Former acting US Customs and Border Protection chief Mark Morgan and former Immigration and Customs Enforcement chief Tom Homan – the faces of Trump's polarizing policies – contributed to the project, as did Kathy Nuebel Kovarik, one of the policy advisers pushing to end certain immigrant protections behind the scenes. The Project 2025 chapter on overhauling the Department of Homeland Security was written by Ken Cuccinelli, a top official at the department under Trump.

Some of Trump's most contentious and high-profile hires are credited with working on "Mandate for Leadership," including some whose tenures ended under a cloud of controversy.

Before Trump adviser Peter Navarro went to prison for refusing to comply with a congressional subpoena as part of the House investigation into the January 6, 2021, US Capitol attack, he wrote a section defending the former president's trade policies and advocating for punitive tariffs.

Other contributors include: Michael Pack, a conservative filmmaker who orchestrated a mass firing at the US Agency for Global Media after he was installed by Trump; Frank Wuco, a senior White House adviser who once promoted far-right conspiracies on his talk radio show, including lies about President Barack Obama's citizenship; former NOAA official David Legates, a notable climate change skeptic investigated for posting dubious research with the White House imprint; and Mari Stull, a wine blogger-turned-lobbyist who left the Trump administration amid accusations she was hunting for disloyal State Department employees.

The culmination of their work, spread across 900 pages, touches every corner of the executive branch and would drastically change the federal government as well as everyday life for many Americans. In summarizing the undertaking, Roberts wrote in "Mandate for Leadership" that Project 2025 represented "the next conservative President's last opportunity to save our republic."

"Conservatives have just two years and one shot to get this right," Roberts said. "With enemies at home and abroad, there is no margin for error. Time is running short. If we fail, the fight for the very idea of America may be lost."