

Uncovering the Mystery of Presidential “Czars”

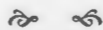
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Abstract:

In the fall of 2009 there was an influx of media reports across news agencies regarding the topic of presidential policy advisors known as “czars.” While recent media reports have criticized presidential czars, the expansion of the Executive Office of the President is not a new phenomenon. For the past seventy years, the institution of the United States Presidency has greatly expanded in power. Between Departmental Secretaries, members of Congress, “czars” and the President there are redundancies within the government and these additional appointments in the

Executive Office of the Presidency affect communication, legislation, and policy implementation. In this article I will consider the ways in which the appointment of special advisors, better known as “czars,” to the President, influences policy implementation and I will try to clarify the ambiguity of the role of czars. Specifically, I will study the case of President Obama’s policy goal to create renewable energy and clean energy initiative using content analysis to determine whether the use of czars allows for more effective policy implementation or, if it hinders communication throughout the branches of government.



Introduction

In the fall of 2009 there was an influx of media reports across news agencies regarding the topic of the growth of presidential policy advisors known as “czars.” For the past seventy years, the institution of the United States Presidency has greatly expanded in power. Presidential scholars such as James Pfiffner, author of *The Modern Presidency*, attest that the White House has become more centralized over the years through a process of “institutionalization” in which policy-making decisions have shifted from Congress and the cabinet-level agencies to the inner workings of the White House (Pfiffner, 2011, p. 88). This phenomenon can be traced back to the creation of the Executive Office of the President and the Brownlow Committee report both in 1939 (Pfiffner, 2011, p. 57). These changes created and allowed for the growth of a White House staff and presidential aides (Pfiffner, 2011, p. 87). This growth of power has led to, according to Arthur Schlesinger, the “Imperial Presidency” (Morris, 2010, p. 123). The defining characteristics for an imperial president are “1) Presidents taking sole responsibility for policy-making powers. 2) Presidents implementing policies through the agencies and bureaucracies of the Executive Branch ... [and] 3) Presidents making concerted effort to hide ... the most egregious instances of the exercise of extralegal authority” (Morris, 2010, p. 124). While Presidents have expanded their power greatly over the years, these characteristics have been blatantly evident in recent administrations. Today, the White House Staff is five times larger than at the time of its formation in 1939, and modern presidents make approximately 7,500 appointments throughout their administration (Pfiffner, 99, p.117). Part of this growth has been the appointment of Executive Branch policy advisors better known as “czars.”

Between Departmental Secretaries, who are approved by the Senate, members of Congress, “czars,” and the President, there are redundancies within the government and these additional appointments in the Executive Office of the Presidency affect communication, legislation, and policy implementation. In this article I will consider the ways in which the appointment of special advisors, better known as “czars,” to the President, influences policy implementation and I will try to clarify the ambiguity of the role of czars. Specifically, I will test whether the use of czars allows for more effective policy implementation or, if it hinders communication throughout the branches of government. In my attempt to find this answer, I will study the case of President Obama’s policy goal to create renewable energy and clean energy initiative. I will study the relationships between this policy goal, President Obama, Carol Browner Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change (Energy Czar), and Department of Energy Secretary Steven Chu. To determine if the creation of the position of the Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change, and the appointment of Carol Browner has helped President Obama accomplish his policy initiatives, I will study the relationship between Browner, Chu, and Obama through media reports and conduct contact analysis of these articles.

Over the course of his presidency, critics of President Obama have scrutinized his use of czars in respect to his policy-making

decisions. The term “czar” is not the official title of the individuals appointed by President Obama and previous presidents, but rather a media created title for specialists within the Executive Branch (James, 2009). The title, however, is not the controversy the ambiguous role of czars is. The concern coming from critics is that these czars, unlike cabinet secretaries, are generally not approved by the Senate, as is the case with other high-ranking executive officials, and are working directly with White House Officials and President Obama in order to help the President achieve his policy goals (Dunn, 2009)¹. While President Obama has been widely criticized for his use of czars, he is not the first to utilize such a position. In fact, the first known U.S. czar was financier Bernard Baruch, the “industry czar,” appointed by Woodrow Wilson to head the War Industries Board (James, 2009). Since Wilson, the use of czars has varied among presidents; however, one can recognize that as the Executive Branch has grown in power the number of czars has grown as well. It is interesting to note that of the thirty-two czars appointed by President Obama, fifteen were positions created by previous administrations, eight were appointed by cabinet secretaries, and eight are brand new positions (Henig, 2009). In short, czars are not a new tool created by the Obama administration to achieve policy goals, but czars do cause a concern because they do not always bear the constitutional approval of the Senate.²

Presidential Appointments and Policy Effectiveness in the Executive Branch

Few studies on the American Presidency focus on the inner workings of the White House despite popular interest on the subject. Since there are few studies on policy advisors, I will discuss key research findings about the roles of presidential appointees, the structure of the advisory committees they serve on, what the President’s role should be, and a theoretical model for measuring the effectiveness of the Executive Branch in order to bring clarity to the role of czars as specialists as well as their actions.

Presidential appointees, or czars, are often specialists in a field of study and they are charged with the difficult duty of implementing a president’s policy that is passed through an executive order. There are many variables involved in successful implementation of a president’s policy. Barnes (2009) compared his own forty years of experience as a presidential appointee to a study done by Durant (2009) who reviewed extensive literature on policy implementation by political appointees. Barnes (2009) discusses that the following four variables are important in implementing presidential policy: (1) the range and nature of the policy and how it was developed; (2) the appointees’ relationship and role in the agency; (3) the context of the internal agency including its culture, personnel, legal authority, resources, and constraints; and (4) the larger political and social contexts of the policy development and its desired implementation. In addition to the appointee understanding the importance of these variables, Barnes (2009) stresses the need for appointees to ask questions related to these variables if communication between appointees and agencies is to

¹ Only nine of the 32 czars appointed by President Obama have been confirmed by the Senate (Dunn, 2009).

² Of the 7454 appointments made by Presidents, only 1756 are approved by the United States Senate (Pfiffner, 2009, p. 117)

be made more effective. Barnes (2009) concludes that it is impossible to construct a set of guidelines for effective policy implementation because each policy has its own set of variables and is unique to each president. Barnes' research shows that czars do not work alone, but rather they work with many different agencies.

Since czars serve as policy advisors and must work with committees to accomplish policy implementation, it is important to see what the role of a policy advisor is on a committee. The Federal Advisory Committees Act of 1972 was created to govern the behavior and membership of the federal advisory committees. There are more than 1,000 advisory committees and, according to Brown (2008), "government advisory committees have the task of improving the epistemic quality of the decisions reached by government officials, interest groups, and individual citizens." Members of these committees possess the power of influence over policy implementation; therefore the membership of these committees must remain balanced in order to ensure the agency makes the most rational decision after having weighed all viewpoints. Federal advisory committees are composed of Regular Government Employees (RGE), Special Government Employees (SGE), or representatives (Brown, 2008). Brown (2008) elaborates that there are very few RGEs who serve on advisory committees and defines SGEs as experts employed to an advisory committees on a temporary or intermittent basis. Representatives serve as spokespersons for organizations. Brown (2008) suggests that the Federal Advisory Committees Act of 1972 and its governance of the composition of advisory committees have created a double standard in the terms of evaluating "expert members of advisory committees solely in terms of their professional qualifications and non-expert members in terms of their political interests." For Brown, the solution is simple; through his study of advisory committees, he suggests a "more promising approach would be to view both experts and lay people (with the latter including both interest-group representatives and those appointed to represent the public interest) in terms of a single category as representing various perspectives" (Brown, 2008, p. 555). Brown is suggesting that positions of experts and representatives could be assumed to a single social and professional role. Brown's notion of combining these two roles could be seen as advocacy for a "czar"-like position. From his evidence, it is plausible that reducing the structure of advisory committees could be beneficial to the workings of the Executive Branch. While this research does not clarify the role of czars, it does help bring clarity to the idea of czars as, in theory, productive members of committees.

While some advocate for more balanced policy advising committees, and others suggest appointees to be more thorough in their policy implementation, Cooper (2011) discusses factors involving the President's role in the policy-making process. Cooper (2011) explains that President Obama's success will not be measured by how many policies he proposes but rather how well the Executive Branch and the federal government are managed and how carefully he carries out his constitutional duties. Cooper (2011) declares that the current state of the Union is one of crisis and that it is President Obama's duty to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed" (Cooper, 2011, p. 1). There is a capacity crisis in the staffing and organization of the federal

branch and, as Cooper (2011) explains, there has been since the Reagan administration. Cooper (2011) elaborates that the federal agencies due to spending and lack of experienced personnel are not equipped with what they need to properly execute their duties, despite political appointees who strive to do so. Cooper (2011) concludes that the crisis which President Obama inherited has been in motion for decades, but that it is his responsibility to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed," and not rely on offices in the Executive Branch to do so (Cooper, 2011, p. 19). The growth of the Executive Office of the President and the appointment of czars leads one to consider whether this method is an efficient way to accomplish policy implementation.

In order to understand the inner workings of the Executive Branch, Vaughn and Villalobos (2009) introduce the MO model (named for Meier and O'Toole), which attempts to give a theoretical explanation for the functions of the modern Presidency. Vaughn and Villalobos (2009) state that bureaucracy shapes both the policy-making power of the president and the president's political performance. Performance is conceptualized as every purposeful action the president takes. Vaughn and Villalobos (2009) further define it as "the output of the many internal White House bureaucracies that have been charged with executing certain tasks and functions" (Vaughn & Villalobos, 2009, p. 159). The MO model uses factors such as management structure, staff organization, management's interaction with external actors, whether interaction is exploitive or buffered, and how management uses resources to satisfy external pressure within internal constraints to determine the productivity of the bureaucratic entity (Vaughn & Villalobos, 2009). The authors suggest that this model can be used to determine the performance of specific bureaucratic institutions or leaders in those institutions (Vaughn & Villalobos, 2009). The authors discuss that combining the theoretical power of the MO model with extensive literature on bureaucracies can increase the understanding of the functions of the White House (Vaughn & Villalobos, 2009). While Vaughn and Villalobos (2009) do not apply this theory to the structure of the White House, this article does make an interesting case and shows that efficiency of the Executive Office of the President could be evaluated empirically. Thus, these studies help one understand the inner workings of the Executive Branch, the role of policy advisors and how one could theoretically study the Executive Branch bureaucracy, they do not bring clarity to the role of presidential czars.

Data/Method

In order to evaluate whether policy advisors or czars contribute to the implementation of President Obama's policy goals, I have collected newspaper articles from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* through LexisNexis. LexisNexis is an online database that allows its users to access news articles from thousands of publishers. I will carry out a content analysis of these articles.

I chose to use articles from the *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* because they are two of the nation's most popular newspapers for political coverage. I had originally planned to use articles from *The Washington Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, to have a larger and more diverse sample, but these publications yielded very few articles, most of which were not relevant. I also

chose not to use editorials in my data to avoid a possible bias. While method guides state concerns for using newspaper articles as data sources, it is not due to inaccuracies in data, but rather risking collecting insufficient data (Franzosi, 1987, p. 7). Additionally, Franzosi (1987) explains that no data source is without error (Franzosi, 1987, p. 9). By using articles, most of which were written by Associated Press journalists, I believe that my data will yield the most accurate results possible through using media sources due to the lack of information available on the inner-workings of the White House.

The data I have collected consists of forty-seven articles: twenty-six from *The New York Times* and twenty-one from *The Washington Post*. I selected these articles by using the search terms “renewable energy or clean energy and Carol Browner or Steven Chu,” with a time frame over the past two years and limiting the search to the stated newspapers. A search with these terms produced all of the articles over the past two years that contained information on clean energy or renewable energy in relation to Carol Browner or Seven Chu. Upon collection of the articles, I indicated the topic of the article (clean energy or renewable energy) and the number of times either Browner, Chu, or President Obama were mentioned, and whether the articles reported interaction with each Browner and Chu, or Congress. I

will use this information in my content analysis to bring clarity to Carol Browner’s role in the policy-making process has been throughout her appointment as the “energy czar.”

Environmental Policy and the Environment Czar

The forty-seven articles I collected from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* yielded interesting results. Of the 47 articles with the topic of clean or renewable energy, only 12 (25%) mentioned Carol Browner, the Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change. In these twelve articles, Browner was mentioned 32 times and in all but one report there was mention of her interacting with President Obama. Department of Energy Secretary Steven Chu was mentioned in 38 (80%) of the 47 articles. It is interesting to note that while Browner’s interaction with President Obama was recorded in 91% of the articles that she was mentioned in, interaction between Chu and Obama was less frequent. I discovered that interaction between Chu and Obama was recorded in only 20 of the 38 articles, at a rate of 52.6%. This demonstrates that while there are more media reports on Secretary Chu, when Browner’s name appears, it is in relation with the President and explains the media’s concern with the ambiguity of czars due to Browner’s potential influence on President Obama’s policy implementation. I have summarized these findings in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. Frequency of Appearance in Articles

	Browner (Energy Czar)	Chu (Energy Secretary)	President Obama
Number of Articles Mentioning Official	12 (25.5%)	38 (80%)	39 (82%)
Number of times mentioned total	32	104	245
Average times mentioned per article	0.68	2.21	5.212
N = 47 articles			

Table 2. Articles Mentioning Browner in Relation to President Obama/ Congress

	Number of Articles
President	11 (91%)
Congress	6 (50%)
N = 17 articles	

Table 3. Articles Mentioning Chu in Relation to President Obama/ Congress

	Number of Articles
President	20 (52.6%)
Congress	20 (52.6%)
N = 38 articles	

It is important to note that while Browner and Chu are reported to have different levels of communication with President Obama, they both have similar levels of communication with Congress. Browner is reported to have some level of communication with Congress in six of the twelve articles in which she is mentioned, or 50%. Similarly, Chu is reported to have some level of communication with Congress in 20 of the 38 articles in which he is mentioned, or 52.6%. Since Browner and Chu have similar contact with Congress as a whole or Congress people, I will attempt to evaluate if Browner's closer relationship with President Obama has affected his clean energy initiatives.

Three of the 47 articles I analyzed mentioned Browner at higher rates than the rest. To determine if these articles reveal clarity to Browner's job or the type of communication Browner had with President Obama, and if this communication mentioned specific policy goals or policy implementation, I broke down the content further. The results were mixed and I will discuss their meaning.

The first article I analyzed was entitled "House Panel Votes to Strip E.P.A. of Power to Regulate Greenhouse Gases" (Broder, 2011). This article discusses that President Obama plans to veto any bill passed by the Senate that would strip the Environmental Protection Agency of regulatory powers, but the article also reveals Carol Browner's unique role as a czar. The article discusses Obama's involvement in clean and renewable initiatives. Browner comments that Obama talks less about global warming now than at the start of his term, but that "developing an energy policy that benefits consumers and makes the country more secure" is important to the President (Broder, 2011). There was no mention of what this policy might be, or what Browner's role would be in regard to helping President Obama implement it. Browner also advocates President Obama's accomplishments in brokering "a historical deal to reduce emissions from cars and light trucks, revved up energy efforts across the federal government and poured tens of billions of dollars into renewable energy programs and infrastructure" (Broder, 2011). While Browner mentions all of the feats she was part of, she does not state what her role was in the process, or how President Obama was able to achieve these goals. It is mentioned that the administration has altered its approach to clean energy since the failure of the "cap and trade" legislation. This article shows that Browner was involved in clean energy policy, but does not bring clarity to her role.

The second article, entitled "Director of Policy on Climate Will Leave," informs the reader that Carol Browner will be leaving her post as the Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change (Broder, 2011). The article states that Browner was charged with the duty of "directing the administration's efforts to enact comprehensive legislation to reduce emissions of climate-altering gases and moving the country away from a dependence on dirty-burning fossil fuels" (Broder, 2011). Part of this initiative took place in the form of the "cap and trade" legislation, which aimed to reduce emission by capping the amount of emissions an entity could produce, and creating a system of trading emission credits. This legislation passed in the House of Representatives but failed in the Senate. The failure of this initiative may have convinced President Obama to recognize that major climate change legislation is not likely to pass in the next two years. The

article did state what Browner was able to accomplish, and she was credited with her prompt response to the British Petroleum (B. P.) oil spill of 2010 and creating a deal that is said to increase automobile fuel efficiency nearly 25% over the next five years. This article, however, does not state how Browner was able to accomplish these initiatives. While it is somewhat clear what Browner was supposed to accomplish during her time in the White House, it is unclear what she did to try to meet the goals set by President Obama.

The third article, entitled "How Politics Spilled into Policy," helped to shed some light on what Browner actually *did* in the White House (Eilperin & Leahy, 2010). This article summarized the events that led President Obama to lift the ban on off-shore drilling 18 days before the B. P. oil spill. In this case, Browner was an advisor who worked to research lifting the ban for over a year and used the moratorium to help push clean energy initiatives. In order to help fuel the "cap and trade" bill, Browner was to get representatives and senators on board by proposing to lift the moratorium on off-shore drilling in exchange for a vote on the bill (Eilperin & Leahy, 2010). This plan faltered after the B. P. oil spill and the moratorium on drilling was reinstated. The authors of this article stated that when the moratorium was initially lifted, "fundamental questions were not pursued because to administration officials generally accepted the conventional view of the industry's safety record" and "they were focused on the environmental factors ... not the engineering risks of exploration" (Eilperin & Leahy, 2010). While Browner was on a committee and not acting alone to advise President Obama on the off-shore drilling moratorium, it is apparent that there were flaws in the advising process. It is evident that regulations set in place by the Federal Advisory Committees Act of 1972 were not implemented. It is interesting that while Browner is an expert in the realm of clean energy, the panel that headed the research was still strictly political and experts in the appropriate field were not advised. While Browner is not at fault for the composition of the advisory board, she surely was not ensuring a fluent and cohesive flow of communication between departmental secretaries, the White House, and Congress, as Barnes (2009) advises policy advisors to do.

Taken individually, these articles do not clearly define what Browner's role in the Obama administration actually entailed. It appears that Browner was given a great amount of responsibility in the passage of the "cap and trade" legislation, but it is unclear what exactly her efforts were to accomplish in this failed mission. In the end, the legislation failed and she was given smaller, but still unclear, responsibilities for clean energy initiatives. While Browner certainly played a role in President Obama's push for clean energy legislation, it is unclear whether or not she affected the legislation. Since Browner was relieved of her position as Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change, one could infer that it was because she was not able to accomplish President Obama's goals.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of the White House, along with the powers of the president has been growing over the past seventy years. This centralization of power has been a concern for presidential scholars, the media, and the people of this nation.

This concern and criticism could stem from the ambiguous role of the czars in the White House.

My content analysis, as shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3, supports claims that policy advisors appointed by the president have closer working relationships with the president than the departmental secretaries. From my sample, I have found that while czars are in close communication with the president it is unclear what their responsibilities are, and what they do to implement policy. From this it can be concluded that presidential policy advisors do, indeed, affect communication between the President, Departmental Secretaries, and Congress. In the case of Carol Browner, one could infer that her appointment had a negative effect on policy implementation. Future studies that incorporate a larger sample of articles, and czars, along with policies proposed and passed/failed in Congress could offer a more conclusive perspective on the role of czars in the White House. The use of czars creates redundant positions within the Executive Office of the President that already exist in the Presidential Cabinet. This is a concern because, as seen with Carol Browner, these positions are not approved by the senate, yet the policy advisors work closely with the president. While it is understandable for the use of czars to be criticized for their ambiguous roles, the concern should be for the redundancies their positions create in the bureaucracy.

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