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Obama ambassador nominees prompt an uproar with bungled answers, lack of ties

By [Juliet Eilperin](#), Published: February 14

A century-old debate over whether presidents should reward political donors and allies by making them ambassadors has flared again after a string of [embarrassing gaffes](#) by President Obama's picks.

The nominee for ambassador to Norway, for example, prompted outrage in Oslo by characterizing one of the nation's ruling parties as extremist. A soap-opera producer slated for Hungary appeared to have little knowledge of the country she would be living in. A [prominent Obama bundler](#) nominated to be ambassador to Argentina acknowledged that he had never set foot in the country and isn't fluent in Spanish.


Even former senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.), the new U.S. ambassador in Beijing, managed to raise eyebrows during his confirmation hearing by acknowledging, "[I'm no real expert on China.](#)"

The stumbles have highlighted the perils of rewarding well-heeled donors and well-connected politicos with plum overseas assignments and have provided political fodder for Republicans eager to attack the White House. The cases also underscore how a president who once [infuriated donors by denying them perks](#) has now come into line with his predecessors, doling out prominent diplomatic jobs by the dozens to supporters.

"Being a donor to the president's campaign does not guarantee you a job in the administration, but it does not prevent you from getting one," White House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters this week.

For several decades, [presidents have generally followed a "70-30" rule](#) when it comes to such appointments, nominating career foreign service officers for roughly 70 percent of U.S. missions abroad and reserving the rest for political allies.

Political appointees account for [37 percent](#) of the ambassadorships



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filled so far during Obama's tenure, according to the American Foreign Service Association. The rate for his second term so far stands at 53 percent, the group said. [ending the recession](#)

The numbers are at the high end for recent presidents, according to the group's data. Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford inserted political supporters in about 38 percent of their ambassador jobs; at the other end of the scale, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter had about 27 percent. George W. Bush and his father were at 30 percent and 31 percent, respectively.

Obama administration officials say the number has been inflated by a surge of second-term openings in posts typically given to non-diplomats. The rate is sure to fall in coming months, they said.

Even then, it's a notable turnaround from Obama's first year in office, when he gave only about 10 percent of ambassadorships to political donors — angering many of those who were left out.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a member of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, said in an interview that several of Obama's recent nominees were "truly alarming" because of their lack of qualifications. "When you put someone in an ambassador's position who hasn't even been to the country, you are rolling the dice," he said.

The troubles began last month, when million-dollar bundler and Chartwell Hotels chief executive [George Tsunis](#) testified at his confirmation hearing to be ambassador to Norway. Tsunis admitted he had never been to the Scandinavian country and suggested, among other things, that the nation's Progress Party was part of a discounted "fringe." It is actually part of Norway's center-right ruling coalition.

Noah Bryson Mamet was asked during his confirmation hearing this month if he had ever been to Argentina, where he would be ambassador. "I haven't had the opportunity yet to be there," said Mamet, who raised more than \$500,000 for Obama's reelection.

During the same hearing, Robert C. Barber, who raised more than \$1.6 million for Obama in 2012 and has been nominated to serve as ambassador to Iceland, said he had never visited the Nordic nation.

Then there is Colleen Bell, the nominee for ambassador to Hungary and a producer of "The Bold and the Beautiful" soap opera, who raised or contributed about \$800,000 to Obama in the last election. She stammered her way through testimony about U.S. strategic interests in the country, which is the focus of growing international alarm over far-right lawmakers' attitude toward Jews and other minorities.

"I have no more questions for this incredibly highly qualified group of nominees," McCain said sarcastically during the hearing for several of the nominees.

David Wade, chief of staff for Secretary of State John F. Kerry, said in a statement that political appointees ranging from Shirley Temple to former vice president Walter Mondale had won plaudits as diplomats. White House officials note that several of Obama's first-term appointees, such as television executive Charles Rivkin in France and technology lawyer John Victor Roos in Japan, got high marks.

"It's a strength, not a stigma, that an ambassador spent decades running a corporation or serving as a governor or senator," Wade said. "The question is the individual, not where they come from, period."

In addition to donors, recent ambassadorships have been handed to former White House and campaign aides, including [Patrick Gaspard](#) in South Africa, Rufus Gifford in Denmark and Mark Childress in Tanzania. Obama has also nominated former deputy White House counsel Cassandra Butts to serve as chief of mission in the Bahamas.

As in past administrations, some of the non-diplomats have run into trouble. During Obama's first term, political appointees in Malta, [Luxembourg](#), [Kenya](#) and the Bahamas all resigned after inspectors general exposed management problems.

"I'm amazed at how the State Department let those people go up so unprepared," said Tom Korologos, an adviser at law

firm DLA Piper who served as the U.S. ambassador to Belgium under George W. Bush. “When I went up for confirmation as ambassador to Belgium, I knew more about Belgium than the Belgians did.”

All nominees go through what is informally referred to as “ambassador school,” where they learn about the country for which they’ve been selected and sit with a desk officer at the State Department to learn about ongoing developments.

There is no specific requirement that ambassadorial nominees, whether career or political, have visited the country in question. The most recent U.S. ambassador to Argentina, political appointee Vilma Socorro Martinez, had never been there before taking the top spot. But nominees are often fluent in the country’s language or have some connection to the region.

There is a long history of fumbled confirmation hearings and missteps abroad by politically connected ambassadors. [Maxwell Gluck](#), a women’s clothing store chain owner who was nominated in 1957 to serve as U.S. ambassador to Ceylon, was unable to name the premier of that country, now known as Sri Lanka, but got confirmed anyway. George H.W. Bush’s ambassador to Italy, Peter Secchia, got in trouble for saying he loved that country’s “beautiful girls,” while another GOP donor arrived around the same time in Spain without speaking Spanish.

Pennsylvania State University international affairs professor Dennis Jett said U.S. diplomatic posts used to be entirely a matter of patronage. President James A. Garfield was assassinated in 1881 by Charles J. Guiteau, who was aggrieved over being denied a European posting. The Rogers Act of 1924 established a professional foreign service but did not bar political nominees.

Jett, a former career diplomat who served as U.S. ambassador in Peru and Mozambique in the 1990s, said there is no way to eliminate political appointments even though “we’re the only serious country that does it this way.” He favors an annual performance evaluation for career and political diplomats to identify serious problems.

The American Foreign Service Association, which represents career officers, plans to issue proposed guidelines Feb. 25 laying out basic qualifications for a chief of mission. No set of guidelines currently exists, though the Foreign Service Act of 1980 says such posts “should normally be accorded to career members of the Service, though circumstance will warrant appointments from time to time of qualified individuals who are not career members of the Service.” It also says that “contributions to political campaigns should not be a factor in the appointment of an individual as a chief of mission.”

Association President Robert Silverman said the principles emphasize strong management skills and the ability to articulate America’s strategic interests.

“These guidelines will favor people who have worked their entire professional lives to get ready for this type of job,” Silverman said, though he added they would not bar “the talented outsider from coming in.”

Norwegians, meanwhile, are still seething over Tsunis’s erroneous remarks about the Progress Party. Jan Arild Ellingsen, a member of the party who serves in Norway’s parliament, said the remarks were “unacceptable and a provocation” and demanded an apology.

Tsunis has responded with diplomacy, calling Norwegian politicians to apologize. He also contacted Anders Tvegard, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corp.’s Washington correspondent, and offered to do an on-air interview — but only after he is confirmed by the Senate.

Al Kamen contributed to this report.

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