



Written by [James Murphy](#) on March 7, 2024

GOP Seeks Answers on Podesta's Shadowy New Climate Role

On Tuesday, Senator Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.) and Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.) sent a letter to President Joe Biden requesting answers on his selection of longtime Democratic henchman John Podesta to replace John Kerry as the nation's top climate diplomat. The two Republicans accused Biden of "a blatant attempt to sidestep congressional oversight."

McMorris Rodgers is the chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Moore Capito is the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. In late January, Podesta was named to replace John Kerry as the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (SPEC), but Podesta was given a different title and a White House office in a move that many saw as a means to save the controversial Democratic operative from a contentious Senate confirmation hearing.

Since its inception in 2021, the SPEC office has been dogged by accusations of secrecy and acting without oversight.

"This appointment is another example of your administration's practice of creating new offices that do not require Senate confirmation or that do not have explicit statutory missions and constraints," the [letter](#) read. "By placing considerable policy authority with these individuals, you demonstrate a flagrant disregard for the separation of powers and congressional authority under both the Constitution and federal law."

In early February, another GOP senator called for Podesta to face a confirmation hearing. Senator James Risch (R-Idaho) demanded that Podesta be subject to a confirmation hearing — a demand that fell on deaf ears at the White House.

"Any appointed administration official that will heavily rely on State Department staff and resources should be accountable to congressional committees with jurisdiction over State, including the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," Risch [said in a statement](#). "It is not unprecedented for someone serving in the White House to go through Senate confirmation. If the Biden Administration would like for the role of senior advisor for international climate policy to be effective, it should send Mr. Podesta's appointment to our committee for consideration."

Risch is the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.



AP Images
John Podesta



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After naming Podesta as Kerry's replacement, the Biden administration changed the job title "Special Presidential Envoy," a position that requires a confirmation hearing, to "Senior Advisor." In addition, Podesta will be stationed in the White House instead of the State Department, where the SPEC offices are located. He will remain the operational head of the office, although officially the SPEC office will report to Rich Verma, the deputy secretary of state for management and resources.

The SPEC office appears to act independently, and, other than Kerry and two deputies, its staff members' names have not been made public.

"The SPEC Office has overlapping responsibilities with the State Department, significantly undermining the Cabinet-level and Senate-confirmed Secretary of State," Moore Capito and McMorris Rodgers contended. "The lack of clear distinction between the authorities and policy priorities of the State Department and the SPEC Office as the U.S. conducts foreign policy negotiations on environmental and climate issues sows confusion domestically and abroad."

The senators allege that the only difference between Kerry's position and Podesta's is a slight name change and the location of his office.

"As Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy, Mr. Podesta appears to be assuming all of Mr. Kerry's duties to act as an envoy for climate on your behalf and to represent the interests of the United States in international policy negotiations," the letter continued. "There appears to be no distinction between this new title and the role of the SPEC."

The senators requested that several aspects of Podesta's new role be clarified by March 19, including who exactly he will report to; an enumerated list of his responsibilities; a list of who will report to Podesta in his new role, along with their titles; specified differences between Podesta's role and that of Kerry; any effects the new role will have on domestic climate policy; and an acknowledgment that the new role meets the requirements for Senate confirmation.

In short, Moore Capito and McMorris Rodgers seek to move Biden's shadowy "climate czar" position into the light.



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