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Introduction

In planning any type of event at which domestic or foreign dignitaries are to be present, careful attention must be given to the proper ranking of the invited officials and executives to avoid insulting a guest or embarrassing the host.

In a conversation with Henry Catto, I got a lesson on the subject of "classic lies", including what he considers the ultimate one.

The three classic lies are: "The check is in the mail"; "I'm from the government and I am here to help you"; and "Of course I'll respect you in the morning". In addition there is a fourth one and that is "I don't give a damn about protocol". This qualifies as a really great lie, because everyone, in fact, cares supremely.¹

He then recalled the following anecdote:

I'll never forget an Under Secretary of State once came to me, absolutely foaming at the mouth, because he was dissatisfied about the level on which he was seated at a dinner which had several levels of head tables. And his comment started off, "Henry, you know I don't give a damn about protocol, BUT...." The Under Secretary was livid. He strongly believed that he "damn well should be seated at a lower table and not up there in the clouds where nobody could see him".²

It was precisely to avoid an abundance of such explosive situations that the nations of the world had adopted eight principles of precedence at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Those principles established the rank of government officials and serve

¹ Catto interview

² Ibid.



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as the basis of the official orders of precedence in use today throughout the international community.

Despite these guidelines, however, there are many issues with regard to the ranking of dignitaries that do need to be considered and resolved independently, especially when the gathering includes high-level guests from different domestic jurisdictions or various foreign countries. Additional problems arise when notables from the private sector are also going to be in attendance. It is for these reasons that the United States Department of State, the federal agency charged with maintaining and determining American precedence, does not distribute an official table of precedence.³

Unlike the rules for the federal government, there is no comprehensive order of precedence for domestic, state and local government officials. Therefore, it falls on individual jurisdictions to extrapolate their own orders of precedence from the standard guidelines. Nonetheless, there are two basic rules that should always be observed: no one outranks a governor in his own state except the President or Vice President, and no one outranks a mayor in his own city, nor a county commissioner in his own county, except the Governor, President or Vice President.

³ **Error! Main Document Only.** This is an official policy of the United States Government.



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Order of Precedence

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Hosts may need to merge two or more of the tables that follow. This task is not quite as formidable as it may seem, since it is not likely to have all of the categories of officials listed below in attendance at once. Keep in mind that spouses who hold no official rank assume the rank of their husbands or wives. If a husband or wife holds an official position of lower rank to the spouse, that husband or wife still assumes the higher rank of the spouse. Foreigners are ranked with their domestic rank equivalents.

Precedence factors take into account the size and importance of a jurisdiction or corporation. Do not forget to integrate members of the corporate and private sector, where appropriate. A Fortune 100 corporate chairman may rank with the cabinet, while a senior corporate vice-president may rank at the level of a colonel.

When ranking states and state officials, precedence is determined by the state's date of admission to the Union or by its alphabetical order. Note that guests of honor retain their rank but may assume co-host status, if desired. The rule of "ladies first" should be observed on all occasions that are not official.

While the tables that follow are inherently informal and unofficial, they are based on the established practice and, therefore, can be relied on for precedence ranking. If



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in doubt, the Ceremonial Section of the U.S. Department of State, Office of Protocol is the final arbitrator on these matters.⁴

Order of Precedence generally followed by the Federal Government⁵

President of the United States
Visiting Chiefs of State
Vice President of the United States
Governor (when in own state)
County Executive (when in own county)
Mayor (when in own city)
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Chief Justice of the United States
Former Presidents of the United States (by date of assuming office)
U.S. Ambassadors to foreign governments (when at post)
Secretary of State
President, United Nations General Assembly (when in session)
Secretary General of the United Nations
President, United Nations General Assembly (when not in session)
Ambassadors of foreign powers accredited to the United States (in the order of the presentation of their credentials)
Widows of former Presidents of the United States
Ministers of Foreign Powers - Chiefs of Diplomatic Missions (accredited to the U.S.)
Associate Justices of the Supreme Court (in order of confirmation)
Retired Chief Justices
Retired Associate Justices of the Supreme Court (Associate Justices who

⁴ When in doubt, forward your proposed list of names and titles to the Office of Protocol for review. They are always eager to be of assistance. **Error! Main Document Only.**

⁵ Extracted from a variety of sources including: [Department of the Army Protocol Precedence List](#). United States Army 3/1/2010; French, Mary Mel. [United States Protocol](#). Rowman & Littlefield, New York 2010; McCaffree, Mary Jane and Innis, Pauline. [Protocol: The Complete Handbook of Diplomatic, Official, and Social Usage](#). Devon Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. 1985; [Social Usage and Protocol Handbook](#). United States Navy, Washington, D.C. 1979; Swartz. Oretha. [Service Etiquette](#). Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland 1988



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- resign have no rank)
- Members of the Cabinet (by date of department establishment)⁶
 - Secretary of the Treasury
 - Secretary of Defense
 - Attorney General
 - Secretary of the Interior
 - Secretary of Agriculture
 - Secretary of Commerce
 - Secretary of Labor
 - Secretary of Health and Human Services
 - Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
 - Secretary of Transportation
 - Secretary of Energy
 - Secretary of Education
 - Secretary of Veterans Affairs
 - Secretary of Homeland Security
 - Chief of Staff to the President
 - Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
 - Director, Office of Management and Budget (OMB)
 - U.S. Trade Representative
 - Permanent Representative of the U.S. to the United Nations
 - Chair, Council of Economic Advisors
- President Pro Tempore of the Senate
- Senators (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange by date of admission to the Union or alphabetically)
- Governors of States when outside their own states (by date of admission to the Union or alphabetically by state name)
- Acting heads of executive departments
- Former Vice Presidents of the United States
- The House of Representatives, Members (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange by date of admission to the Union or alphabetically)
- The House of Representatives, Delegates (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange by date of admission to the Union or alphabetically)
- Governors of U.S. Territories (arrange by date of entering U.S. jurisdiction)

⁶ The President can make changes to the order with the exception of Cabinet members (Treasury to Homeland Security) that are designated by statute.



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Order of Precedence

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or alphabetically)

- Assistant to the President and Senior Advisor
- Assistant to the President and Deputy Chief of Staff
- Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
- Director of National Intelligence
- Chief of Staff to the Vice President
- Assistants to the President (by seniority)
- Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy
- Chair, Council on Environmental Quality
- Chief of Protocol (when at the White House or accompanying the President)
- Chargé d'affaires of foreign powers (based on accreditation date)
- Former Secretaries of State (by seniority)
- Former Members of the Cabinet (by seniority)
- Deputies to Members of the Cabinet (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange alphabetically)
- U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO (at post)
- U.S. Permanent Representative to the European Union (at post)
- Under Secretaries of the State (as ranked by State)
- Under Secretaries of the Executive Departments (by date of department establishment; if more than one present from a department, as ranked by department)
- Secretaries of the Army, Navy, & Air Force
- Postmaster General
- Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation
- Chairman, Board of Governors, Federal Reserve
- Chairman, Export-Import Bank
- Director, Central Intelligence Agency
- Administrator, Small Business Administration
- Administrator, Agency for International Development
- Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Vice Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Retired Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Chiefs of Staff of the Army and Air Force, Chief of Naval Operations and Commandant of the Marine Corps
- Commandant of the Coast Guard
- Lieutenant Governors (when in own state)
- Permanent Representative of foreign governments to the United Nations
- Secretary General, Organization of American States



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Chairman, Permanent Council of the U.S. to the Organization of American States
Permanent Representative of the U.S. to the Organization of American States
Permanent Representatives of foreign governments to the Organization of American States (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange alphabetically)
Heads of international organizations (i.e. International Monetary Fund, NATO, World Bank)
(5 Star Grade) Generals and Fleet Admirals
Administrator, General Services Administration (GSA)
Administrator, National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Director, Office of Personnel Management
Administrator, Federal Aviation Administration
Chairman, Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Director, Peace Corps
U.S. Ambassadors (on state business)
Chief of Protocol (when not accompanying The President)
Career Ambassadors
Special Assistants to the President (order determined by the sitting President)
Deputy Under Secretaries of State (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange alphabetically)
Assistant Secretaries of the Executive Departments (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange alphabetically)
Members of the Council of Economic Advisors (according to length of continuous service; if service length the same, arrange alphabetically)
Active or Designate US Ambassadors and Ministers (career rank, when in US)
Under Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and the Air Force
Commanders-in-Chief of the Unified and Specified Commands (4 Star Grade)
Vice Chiefs of Staff & Vice Chief of Naval Operations (based on appointment date)
Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps
(4 Star Grade) Generals and Admirals
Assistant Secretaries of the Army, Navy and the Air Force
Commanders-in-Chief of the Unified and Specified Commands (3 Star Grade)



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(3 Star Grade) Lieutenant Generals and Vice Admirals
Former US Ambassadors and Ministers to foreign countries
Ministers of the Foreign Powers (serving in embassies but not accredited)
Deputy Assistant Secretaries of the Executive Departments (based on department establishment date)
Deputy Chief of Protocol
GS-18 Civilians
Counselors of Embassies or Legations of Foreign Powers
(2 Star Grade) Major Generals and Rear Admirals
GS-17 Civilians
(1 Star Grade) Brigadier Generals and Commadores
Assistant Chiefs of Protocol
GS-16 Civilians
Colonels and Navy Captains
GS-15 Civilians

Order of Precedence Generally Followed by State Governments⁷

Governor
County Executive (when in own county)
Mayor (when in own city)
Lieutenant Governor
Comptroller
Attorney General
US Senators in home state (by seniority)
US Representatives in home district
Speaker of the Assembly (lower legislative body)
Chief Justice Court of Appeals (or of highest court)
US Senators (based on seniority)
US Representatives (based on seniority)
President Pro Tempore of the Senate (upper legislative body)
Former Governors
Associate Justices of the Court of Appeals

⁷ **Error! Main Document Only.** Fredrica Goodman, (Director, New York State Office of Special Projects and Protocol) personal interview 4/14/88. While most jurisdictions have similar governing structures, the following table of precedence for state government is based on the structure of New York State.



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Widows of former governors
State Senators (in order of seniority)
State Assemblymen (in order of seniority)

Order of Precedence Generally Followed by Municipal Governments⁸

Mayor
President of the City Council
City Comptroller
State Senators (in order of seniority)
State Assemblymen (in order of seniority)
Chief of Protocol
District Attorneys
Members of the City Council (in order of seniority)
First Deputy Mayor
Deputy Mayor (if more than one, order alphabetically)
Chief of Staff
Counsel to the Mayor
Special Advisors to the Mayor (order alphabetically)
Special Assistants to the Mayor (order alphabetically)
Commissioners of executive departments (based on department creation dates)
Agency heads
Chairmen of boards, commissions and panels

Order of Precedence generally followed by the Armed Forces⁹

The various branches of the Armed Forces of the United States have their own protocol practices with which non-military protocol officials are expected to be familiar.¹⁰

⁸ **Error! Main Document Only.** Ibid. and Margolis interviews

⁹ **Error! Main Document Only.** James Fondren, (Colonel, United States Air Force, Protocol Officer to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) personal interviews 2/88-4/88

¹⁰ **Error! Main Document Only.** Conflicts often arise between military and civilian officials when foreign dignitaries arrive at military installations. If the base is being used only to facilitate transportation, the civilian official should take precedence.



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The following is the order of precedence, based on the branch establishment dates, established by the Department of Defense for the placement of service flags¹¹:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| 1) Army | USA | June 14, 1775 |
| 2) Marine Corps | USMC | November 10, 1775 |
| 3) Navy ¹² | USN | October 13, 1775 |
| 4) Air Force | USAF | September 18, 1947 |
| 5) Coast Guard ¹³ | USCG | August 4, 1790 |

Secretaries of the Armed Forces are ordered¹⁴:

- 1) Army
- 2) Navy
- 3) Air Force
- 4) Coast Guard

Chiefs of Staff of the branch services are ordered by date of chief of service appointment. Individual servicemen are to be ordered by the date of their rank assumption. Reserve officers are ranked with, but after active duty officers of the same grade. Retired military officers than follow active and reserve officers of identical rank.

¹¹ Title 10, USC 113(b); Department of Defense Directive 1005.8 10/31/77

¹² While the Continental Navy was created before the Continental Marines, the order of precedence is reversed. This anomaly has its foundation in the period following the Revolutionary War when both services went into abeyance only to be reauthorized in the 1790s. Following reestablishment, Marine commanders consistently cited November 10, 1775 as their creation date while Navy management used a variety of dates including March 27, 1794 and April 30, 1798 before the Chief of Naval Operations directed in 1972 that the October 13, 1775 was the Navy's official birthday. By that time, the Marine before Navy tradition was so ingrained that the order of precedence based on the branch establishment deviation remains.

¹³ Should the Coast Guard operate as part of the Navy in a time of war, the Coast Guard would precede the U.S. Air Force.

¹⁴ The Marines are part of the Navy Department.



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According to the Department of Defense, the following is the order for members of the armed forces when in formation¹⁵:

- 1) Cadets, US Military Academy
- 2) Midshipmen, US Naval Academy
- 3) Cadets, US Air Force Academy
- 4) Cadets, US Coast Guard Academy
- 5) Midshipmen, US Merchant Marine Academy
- 6) Army
- 7) Marine Corps
- 8) Navy
- 9) Air Force
- 10) Coast Guard
- 11) Army National Guard
- 12) Army Reserve
- 13) Marine Corps Reserve
- 14) Naval Reserve
- 15) Air Force National Guard
- 16) Air Force Reserve
- 17) Coast Guard Reserve
- 18) Other training organizations of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard, in that order, respectively.

¹⁵ Department of Defense Directive 1005.8 10/31/77