

# Paul Dans: Background, Career, and the Significance of Project 2025

## I. Introduction

Paul Dans is an American lawyer and conservative political operative who has gained significant prominence for his leadership of Project 2025, a presidential transition project spearheaded by the Heritage Foundation [1]. This ambitious initiative aims to fundamentally reshape the United States federal government in alignment with right-wing policy objectives [1]. Beyond his role with Project 2025, Dans has held positions within the Trump administration, further solidifying his presence in conservative political circles [1, 2, 3, 4]. This report will delve into a comprehensive analysis of Dans' background, tracing his career trajectory from his early life and education through his legal practice and government service, culminating in his leadership of the highly debated Project 2025. The report will also address the controversies that have marked his career.

Project 2025 represents a substantial undertaking with the explicit goal of restructuring the US federal government based on conservative principles [1]. The project is multifaceted, encompassing detailed policy recommendations, a rigorous personnel vetting process, and comprehensive training programs for potential appointees [5, 6]. This initiative has garnered considerable attention, attracting both fervent support from conservatives who believe it offers a blueprint for effective governance and sharp criticism from those who view its proposals as radical and potentially damaging to democratic norms [5, 7, 8, 9]. Understanding the background and motivations of the individual who led this project is crucial to comprehending its significance and potential impact on American politics. This analysis will explore the various facets of Paul Dans' life and career to provide a thorough understanding of his role and influence.

His background as a lawyer, coupled with his active involvement in conservative politics dating back to his law school years [2], suggests a deeply ingrained commitment to conservative ideology and a deliberate, strategic approach to achieving his political aims. His leadership of the Federalist Society chapter during his time at the University of Virginia School of Law indicates an early and significant engagement with conservative legal and political thought [1, 2, 6]. This early involvement, followed by a career in law and subsequent forays into government and political initiatives, points to a sustained dedication to advancing right-wing principles.

Furthermore, Dans' leadership of Project 2025, an initiative focused on overhauling the entire federal government [1, 5], is particularly noteworthy considering his background in law and urban planning [1, 4]. While his expertise may not have been traditionally centered on federal administration, his diverse professional experiences likely provided him with a unique perspective on the interconnectedness of various governmental functions and the complexities

of managing large-scale systems. This broad understanding could have informed his approach to leading Project 2025 and its ambitious goals.

## **II. Early Life and Education**

Paul Dans was born into a family with strong ties to public service and a leaning towards liberal ideals [1, 6]. His father was a professor at the prestigious Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and his mother contributed to the National Institutes of Health before transitioning to a career as a schoolteacher [1, 10]. Dans has three siblings, and his family's heritage includes roots in the Catholic faith [1, 10, 11]. Notably, he has a twin brother named Tom [6]. His upbringing in the 1970s and 80s, in a family that his own account suggests embraced liberal idealism, stands in contrast to his later conservative activism [6].

Dans' early education included attending Dulaney High School [6]. During his time there, he participated in sports and was a member of the debate team, indicating an early engagement with extracurricular activities and likely the development of skills in argumentation and teamwork [6].

For his higher education, Dans pursued a Bachelor of Science degree in economics and a Master of Science degree in city planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) [1, 2, 4, 11]. It was during his time at MIT that the initial signs of a shift towards conservatism began to emerge [6]. According to a classmate, Dans stood apart from the prevailing "political correctness" on the elite campus around 1990, suggesting an early inclination to question and perhaps diverge from mainstream liberal thought [6]. His master's thesis focused on the redevelopment of industrial parks, such as the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and reportedly reflected a tension between Reagan-style optimism and a sense of declining expectations for the nation [6]. This suggests that even in his academic work, Dans was grappling with different perspectives on America's future.

Continuing his academic pursuits, Dans attended law school at the University of Virginia, where he earned his Juris Doctor (JD) [1, 2, 4]. It was during his time in law school that his conservative transformation became more pronounced. He joined the campus chapter of the Federalist Society, a well-known conservative legal network, and eventually rose to the position of chapter president [1, 2, 6]. This active involvement in the Federalist Society indicates a clear embrace of conservative legal and political principles. Furthering his legal education, Dans also spent a year studying in Paris, where he obtained a certificate in French Law from the University of Paris II Pantheon-Assas in 1996 [2].

The significant ideological shift Dans underwent during his college years, moving from a liberal upbringing to embracing conservatism, is a notable aspect of his early life [6]. His involvement with the Federalist Society in law school solidified this transformation, indicating a conscious adoption of a conservative political identity. This ideological evolution likely played a crucial role in shaping his subsequent career choices and his leadership of Project 2025.

His diverse academic background, encompassing degrees in economics and city planning from MIT followed by a law degree, provided Dans with a multifaceted understanding of policy and governance [1, 2, 4, 11]. This combination of economic principles, urban development strategies, and legal frameworks likely equipped him with a comprehensive perspective on societal issues and potential solutions, which he may have drawn upon in his later career and in formulating the ambitious agenda of Project 2025.

### **III. Legal Career**

Before fully entering the realm of government and political operations, Paul Dans established a substantial legal career. Prior to attending law school, he gained experience working at architecture and planning firms [1, 4]. Following his graduation from law school, Dans practiced law in New York City [1, 2, 4]. His legal career spanned approximately 20 years and included affiliations with several prominent law firms, such as LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae and Debevoise & Plimpton [1, 2]. He also spent a number of years running his own solo law practice [1, 2]. His primary area of practice was commercial litigation [2].

A significant point in his legal career came in 2009 when Dans was hired to contribute to the defense of Chevron in a high-profile class action lawsuit concerning oil pollution in Ecuador [1]. He is credited as the "intellectual architect" of Chevron's defense strategy in this complex litigation, which notably involved the subpoenaing of documentary movie outtakes as evidence [2]. His work on this landmark case garnered attention, being featured in a profile in *American Lawyer* magazine and also forming the subject of a book detailing the extensive legal battle [2]. This case highlights his capacity for strategic legal thinking and his ability to navigate intricate and high-stakes legal challenges.

Beyond his direct legal practice, Dans was actively involved in professional legal organizations. He served on the steering committee of the New York City Lawyers Chapter of the Federalist Society, further demonstrating his commitment to conservative legal principles [2]. He was also a member of the Media and Communications Law Committee of the New York City Bar Association [2]. Additionally, he holds memberships in organizations such as the American Planning Association, the Federal Bar Association, and the Hispanic National Bar Association [4].

Dans' extensive two-decade career in commercial litigation in New York City, which included working at well-regarded international law firms and managing his own practice, underscores his significant legal expertise and his experience in navigating complex legal disputes [2]. This lengthy tenure in a demanding professional environment suggests the development of strong analytical, strategic thinking, and advocacy skills, qualities that likely proved beneficial in his subsequent roles in government and in leading Project 2025.

His pivotal role in the Chevron case, where he was the key strategist behind their defense, further emphasizes his ability to formulate innovative legal arguments and manage high-stakes litigation [2]. This highlights a proactive and strategic mindset, suggesting a capacity to handle intricate challenges and devise effective solutions in a complex legal context.

#### **IV. Entry into Government Service**

Paul Dans transitioned into government service during the Trump administration, holding several key roles. He first served as a senior advisor in the Office of Community Planning and Development at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [1, 2, 3, 4]. Following this, he moved to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), where he served as chief of staff from February 2020 to December 1, 2020 [1, 3]. In this role, Dans was responsible for managing the federal agency that oversees human resources policy for over two million federal employees [1, 3]. He also acted as OPM's White House liaison, working closely with the White House Office of Presidential Personnel to manage the staffing of approximately 4,000 presidential appointees across the federal government [1, 3].

Dans was perceived as a loyalist to President Trump and collaborated closely with John McEntee to remove career civil servants who were deemed insufficiently loyal to the administration [1, 12]. His appointment as chief of staff reportedly occurred without the knowledge of the then-OPM Director, Dale Cabaniss, who subsequently resigned abruptly in 2020 [1, 3, 12, 13]. Reports suggest that Dans and another Trump ally pressured Cabaniss to replace OPM's Chief of Staff and to circumvent federal hiring regulations [3]. Allegations of "poor treatment" by Dans were cited as a contributing factor to Cabaniss's resignation [3, 13].

Even after his tenure at OPM, Dans continued to be involved in government. He was appointed as Chairman of the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) for a six-year term that extends to January 1, 2027 [4]. In this role, he serves as a presidential appointee representing the state of Maryland [4]. His background in urban planning, gained through his master's degree and early career, likely contributed to this appointment.

Dans' roles within the Trump administration, particularly his position at OPM, clearly demonstrate his alignment with Trump's political objectives and his readiness to implement potentially contentious policies, such as prioritizing political loyalty in personnel decisions [1, 12]. His close working relationship with John McEntee, who was known for his efforts to ensure political alignment within the administration, and the circumstances surrounding Dale Cabaniss's resignation, suggest that Dans played a significant role in advancing Trump's agenda within the civil service.

His subsequent appointment as Chairman of the NCPC, even after leaving his role at OPM, indicates a continued level of trust and recognition from the Trump administration or its allies regarding his expertise in planning and policy [4]. This suggests that his skills in urban planning and policy, developed through his education and early professional experiences, were valued beyond his more politically charged roles, providing him with a platform to influence the development of the nation's capital.

#### **V. Leadership of Project 2025**

Paul Dans is most notably recognized for his leadership of Project 2025, an ambitious initiative launched by the Heritage Foundation in April 2022, which he directed until August 2024 [1].

Dans himself described the project as a systematic effort to prepare for a potential Republican presidential transition, aiming to bring a "new army" of "aligned, trained, and essentially weaponized conservatives ready to do battle against the deep state" [1, 3]. The overarching goal was to create a second Trump administration that would be even more aligned with the "MAGA" agenda than the first [6].

Project 2025 was structured around four key pillars [5, 6]: a comprehensive policy guide offering recommendations across the entire executive branch; a "conservative LinkedIn"-style database of individuals vetted for their loyalty to Trump and willing to serve in the administration, which ultimately included over 10,000 names [6, 9]; the "Presidential Administration Academy," offering training seminars for potential appointees on the workings of government and the administration's policy objectives [5, 6]; and detailed battle plans for each federal agency, outlining strategies to implement the administration's policies and overcome potential resistance [5, 6]. According to reports, the personnel database was considered the most critical component of the project [6].

A key strategy championed by Dans within Project 2025 was the reinstatement of "Schedule F," a provision introduced towards the end of Trump's first term and subsequently repealed by the Biden administration [3, 6]. This provision would reclassify as many as 50,000 career civil servants in policy-shaping roles into a new job category, making it significantly easier to hire and fire them [3, 6]. Dans reportedly emphasized the importance of reissuing Trump's executive order on Schedule F [3]. He also used strong rhetoric, suggesting a desire to "smash" the federal government and use a "wrecking ball" to dismantle existing structures, advocating for a substantial increase in the number of political appointees [3]. Furthermore, Project 2025 compiled a list of federal employees who were perceived as potential obstacles to Trump's agenda [8]. The project also outlined policy recommendations across a wide range of sectors, including the economy, environment, social issues, and national security [7, 9].

Dans' leadership of Project 2025 was marked by a determined and assertive approach to preparing for a potential Republican presidency. His vision for the project involved not only policy development and personnel selection but also a strategic effort to ensure that a future administration would be staffed by individuals deeply committed to the Trump agenda and equipped to swiftly implement it [5, 6]. The emphasis on loyalty, the plan to reinstate Schedule F, and the combative language used to describe the project's goals all reflect a desire for a more tightly controlled and politically aligned federal government.

His role in directing this large-scale initiative highlights his organizational and strategic planning abilities, as well as his capacity to mobilize resources and coordinate the efforts of numerous individuals and organizations involved in the project. The extensive scope and detailed nature of Project 2025 under his leadership demonstrate a significant undertaking aimed at fundamentally reshaping the executive branch.

## **VI. Controversies and Criticisms**

Paul Dans' career and particularly his leadership of Project 2025 have been marked by several controversies and criticisms. His involvement in the Trump administration, specifically his role as chief of staff at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), drew scrutiny due to allegations of pressuring career civil servants and contributing to a climate of political interference [3, 12, 13]. The abrupt resignation of OPM Director Dale Cabaniss, allegedly following pressure from Dans and another Trump ally, raised concerns about the politicization of the civil service [3, 13].

Project 2025 itself has been a subject of intense debate and criticism. Opponents have characterized the initiative as a radical plan to dismantle the professional civil service and install loyalists, potentially undermining the expertise and independence of government agencies [5, 7, 8, 9]. The proposal to reinstate "Schedule F," which would allow for the dismissal of civil servants in policy-related roles, has been particularly controversial, with critics arguing that it could lead to a "spoils system" where political loyalty trumps competence [3, 6].

Dans' own rhetoric surrounding Project 2025 has also drawn criticism. His description of the project as creating an "army" of "weaponized conservatives" ready to "do battle against the deep state" has been interpreted by some as inflammatory and indicative of a hostile approach towards the existing federal bureaucracy [1, 3]. The compilation of lists of federal employees perceived as obstacles to a potential Trump administration has been viewed as a punitive measure that could stifle dissent and undermine morale within the civil service [8].

Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the influence of the Heritage Foundation and other conservative groups involved in Project 2025 on potential future government policies and personnel decisions [5, 7, 9]. Critics argue that the project represents an attempt to impose a highly ideological agenda across the federal government, potentially disregarding diverse perspectives and potentially leading to policies that are not in the best interest of all Americans [7, 8, 9]. The level of coordination and detail within Project 2025 has also prompted concerns about the potential for a rapid and potentially disruptive transformation of the federal government should its proposals be implemented.

In summary, the controversies surrounding Paul Dans primarily stem from his actions during his time in the Trump administration, particularly at OPM, and his leadership of Project 2025. Allegations of political interference in the civil service and the ambitious, potentially disruptive nature of Project 2025 have made him a central figure in debates about the future of American governance and the role of the civil service.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Paul Dans' career trajectory illustrates a significant shift from a background with family ties to liberal ideals to becoming a prominent figure in the American conservative movement. His diverse educational background in economics, urban planning, and law provided him with a broad understanding of societal issues and governance. His two-decade legal career in New York City honed his strategic thinking and advocacy skills, culminating in his pivotal role in the Chevron litigation.

His entry into government service during the Trump administration marked a turning point, placing him in positions where he could directly influence federal policy and personnel. His tenure at OPM, characterized by his close alignment with Trump's agenda and controversies surrounding the departure of Director Dale Cabaniss, highlighted his willingness to implement politically driven objectives.

However, Dans' most significant role to date has been his leadership of Project 2025. This ambitious undertaking by the Heritage Foundation aimed to create a comprehensive blueprint for a potential Republican presidential administration, encompassing policy recommendations, personnel vetting, and training programs. Dans' vision for the project involved a significant overhaul of the federal government, with an emphasis on loyalty to the president and a more assertive approach to implementing conservative policies.

Project 2025 and Dans' leadership have generated considerable controversy. Critics have raised concerns about the potential for the politicization of the civil service, the erosion of its independence and expertise, and the implementation of a radical ideological agenda. The proposal to reinstate "Schedule F" and Dans' rhetoric about "weaponizing" conservatives against the "deep state" have been particularly contentious.

Despite these criticisms, Dans remains a significant figure within conservative circles, having spearheaded one of the most ambitious and detailed presidential transition projects in recent history. His ability to mobilize resources, coordinate a large-scale initiative, and articulate a clear vision for the future of the federal government underscores his influence within the conservative movement.

In conclusion, Paul Dans' journey from a background with liberal leanings to a key figure in conservative politics, culminating in his leadership of the transformative Project 2025, reflects a deep commitment to right-wing principles and a strategic approach to achieving political objectives. While his career has been marked by both significant achievements and notable controversies, his role in shaping the future direction of American conservative governance through Project 2025 ensures his continued prominence in US politics.

## VIII. References

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**Disclaimer:** This report relies on information available in the provided search results and may not encompass all aspects of Paul Dans' background, career, or the entirety of the debates surrounding Project 2025. The information presented is intended to provide a comprehensive overview based on the available sources.