



Highlights of [GAO-04-328](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Because advisory committees are established to advise federal decision makers on significant national issues, it is essential that their membership be, and be perceived as being, free from conflicts of interest and balanced as a whole. GAO was asked to (1) describe the role of federal advisory committees in the development of national policies, (2) examine the extent to which existing guidance and policies and procedures for evaluating committee members for conflicts of interest and points of view ensure independent members and balanced committees, and (3) identify practices and measures that could help ensure independence and balance.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that GSA and/or OGE, as appropriate, give direction to agencies on: the proper use of representative appointments; information that would help ensure committees are, and are perceived as, balanced; and practices that would better ensure independence and balance and enhance transparency in the advisory committee process. GSA agreed with GAO's findings and agreed to work with OGE to implement the recommendations. OGE agreed that representative appointments need review but disagreed that its guidance has limitations. GAO continues to believe the guidance could be improved to better ensure that agencies are appropriately appointing committee members.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-328.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or NazzaroR@gao.gov.

FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Additional Guidance Could Help Agencies Better Ensure Independence and Balance

What GAO Found

Federal advisory committees play an important role in shaping public policy by providing advice on a wide array of issues, such as stem cell research, drinking water standards, space exploration, drug approvals, and federal land management. About 950 advisory committees perform peer reviews of scientific research; offer advice on policy issues; identify long-range issues; and evaluate grant proposals, among other functions.

Additional governmentwide guidance could help agencies better ensure the independence of members—that is, that they are free from significant conflicts of interest—and balance of federal advisory committees. For example, current limitations in the Office of Government Ethics' (OGE) guidance are a factor in at least three agencies' continuing a long-standing practice of appointing most or all members as "representatives"—expected to reflect the views of the entity or group they are representing and not subject to conflict-of-interest reviews—even when the agencies call upon the members to provide advice on behalf of the government. Such members would be more appropriately appointed as "special government employees," who are reviewed for conflicts of interest. OGE officials agreed with GAO that these agencies' appointments of some members as representatives of their fields of expertise are not appropriate, and this practice avoids using the special government employee category that was created to help the government hire experts in various fields for such purposes. OGE guidance that representatives may speak for, among others, any recognizable group of persons should be clarified to state that they generally are not to represent an expertise. Also, to be effective, advisory committees must be, and be perceived as being, fairly balanced in terms of points of view and functions to be performed. However, the General Services Administration's (GSA) guidance on advisory committee management does not address what types of information could be helpful to agencies in assessing the points of view of potential committee members, nor do agency procedures identify what information should be collected about potential members to make decisions about committee balance. Consequently, many agencies do not identify and systematically collect and evaluate information pertinent to determining the points of view of potential committee members, such as previous public positions or statements on matters being reviewed.

GAO identified promising practices and measures that can better ensure independence and balance and promote transparency in the federal advisory committee system, such as obtaining nominations from the public and making public information about how members are identified and screened. Wider use of these practices—particularly for committees addressing sensitive or controversial topics—could reduce the likelihood that committees are, or are perceived as being, biased or imbalanced.