

The Bureaucracy: The Real Government

Red tape. Paper pushers. Bean counters. Vast, cookie-cutter buildings with fluorescent lighting and thousands of file cabinets.



This building in Washington, D.C., houses the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, a bureaucratic agency.

These are the images that come to mind when many Americans think of government bureaucracy. A bureaucrat is someone who works in administrative capacity for the government. How important are bureaucrats and their government agencies in actually running the United States government? According to some, they are the real government — the ones behind the scenes who go to work when the politicians are enjoying the spotlight.

Max Weber's Bureaucracy



Max Weber is known as the founder of modern sociology.

Max Weber, a German sociologist was one of the first people in modern times to think seriously about the importance of bureaucracy. The term actually comes from the French word "bureau," a reference to the small desks that the king's representatives set up in towns as they traveled across the country on king's business. So bureaucracy literally means "government with a small desk."

Weber wrote about Germany during the early 20th century, when developing capitalism was spawning more and more large businesses. The changing economic scene had important implications for government. Weber saw bureaucracy as a rational way for complex businesses and governments to organize. He did not see them as necessary evils, but as the best organizational response to a changing society.

According to Weber, model bureaucracies have the following characteristics:

- A chain of command that is hierarchical; the top bureaucrat has ultimate control, and authority flows from the top down
- A clear division of labor in which every individual has a specialized job
- Clearly written, well-established formal rules that all people in the organization follow
- A clearly defined set of goals that all people in the organization strive toward
- Merit-based hiring and promotion; no granting of jobs to friends or family unless they are the best qualified
- Job performance that is judged by productivity, or how much work an individual gets done

Weber emphasized the importance of the bureaucracy in getting things done and believed that a well-organized, rational bureaucracy is the secret behind the successful operation of modern societies.

The Iron Triangle

Observers of the modern American government often point to an iron triangle that best demonstrates who really does the work of government. The iron triangle, sometimes called a subgovernment, consists of interest groups, members of congressional subcommittees, and agency bureaucrats.



(Who really governs the United States? Many political analysts believe policy is set by the participants in the "Iron Triangle" rather than elected officials.)

According to the theory, agencies and departments usually keep close contacts with interest group lobbyists who want to influence their actions. Interest groups may provide valuable statistics to government agencies, and they are motivated to have their point of view heard. Both lobbyists and bureaucrats value contact with congressional subcommittees that shape the laws that govern their interests. Working together, these three groups set most government policies.

An example of such an iron triangle would be the American Association for Retired People (AARP), the House Subcommittee on Aging, and the Social Security Administration all working together to set government policy on Social Security.

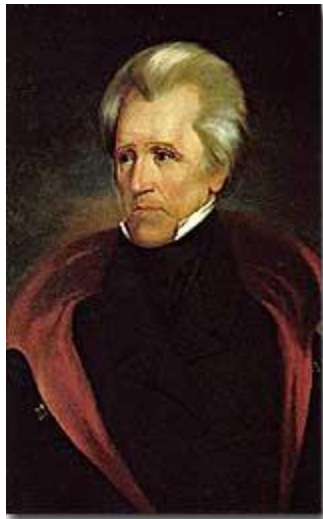
Advisers, bookkeepers, secretaries. So, it is not only the famous people — the President, the Chief of Staff, the Speaker of the House, or the Senate Majority Leader — who make the real decisions in government. Often, the real players in government are the agency bureaucrats — the people behind the scenes.

The Development of the Bureaucracy

The original bureaucracy of the federal government consisted only of employees from three small departments — State, Treasury, and War. The executive branch employs today almost three million people. Not only have the numbers of bureaucrats grown, but also the methods and standards for hiring and promoting people have changed dramatically.

Patronage

(Andrew Jackson cemented the spoils system (also called rotation-in-office) during his presidency. He formed his own group of advisors from his friends and political allies, known as the "Kitchen Cabinet," to support his goals for the nation.)



George Washington promised to hire only people "as shall be the best qualified." Still, most of his employees belonged to the budding Federalist Party — the party toward which Washington leaned. When Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson became President, he dismissed many of the Federalists and filled their jobs with members from his party. With this action, he began a long tradition of filling government positions through patronage, a system of rewarding friends and political allies in exchange for their support.

Andrew Jackson is regarded as the President who entrenched the patronage, or "spoils" system. Following the old saying, "to the victor go the spoils," he brought a whole new group of "Jacksonian Democrats" into office. Jackson argued that the spoils system brought greater rotation in office. He thought it was healthy to clear out the government workers who had worked for predecessors, lest they become corrupt.

(The U.S. Postal Service has changed along with the nation. From the Pony Express to today's uniformed postal workers, these bureaucrats deliver the mail every day, regardless of the weather)

During the 1800s, while more and more federal employees were landing their jobs through patronage, the bureaucracy was growing rapidly as new demands were placed on government. As the country expanded westward new areas, a greatly expanded Post Office was necessary. The Civil War sparked the creation of thousands of government jobs and new departments to handle the demands of warfare. After the war, the Industrial Revolution encouraged economic growth and more government agencies to regulate the expanding economy. agencies were needed to manage the land and its settlement. And as people moved into the new



The Pendleton Act

The spoils tradition was diluted in 1881 when Charles Guiteau, a disappointed office seeker, killed President James Garfield because he was not granted a government job. After Garfield's assassination, Congress passed the Pendleton Act, which created a merit-based federal civil service. It was meant to replace patronage with the principle of federal employment on the basis of open, competitive exams. The Pendleton Act created a three-member Civil Service Commission to administer this new merit system. At first only about 10 percent of federal employees were members of the civil service. Today, about 85 to 90 percent take this exam.

Growth in the 20th Century

In reaction to the excesses of Gilded Age millionaires, many Americans demanded that the government regulate business and industry. As a result, a group of independent regulatory commissions emerged as the 20th century dawned. The first of these agencies was the Interstate Commerce Commission, set up in 1887 to monitor abuses in the railroad industry. Reform movements of the early 20th century demanded that government regulate child labor, food processing and packaging, and working and living conditions for the laboring classes.



(The Civilian Conservation Corps was part of Roosevelt's New Deal programs to battle the Depression. Aimed at employing men between the ages of 18 and 25, over 3,000,000 men joined the CCC and became members of the federal bureaucracy between 1933 and 1941.)

The largest growth of the bureaucracy in American history came between 1933 and 1945. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal meant bigger government, since agencies were needed to administer his many programs. With the American entry into World War II in 1941, the needs of the war elevated the number of federal agencies and employees even more. During

those 12 Roosevelt years, the total number of federal employees increased from a little over half a million in 1933 to an all time high of more than 3.5 million in 1945.

After World War II ended in 1945, the total number of federal employees decreased significantly, but still has remained at levels between about 2.5 and 3 million. Contrary to popular opinion, the federal bureaucracy did not grow in numbers significantly during the last half of the 20th century. Federal bureaucrats did, however, greatly increase their influence.

The Organization of the Bureaucracy



(Along with the Vice President, the President's Cabinet members are his most important advisors. This picture shows President Reagan, Vice President Bush, and Cabinet members in the Oval Office.)

Even the experts can't agree on the total number of federal government agencies, commissions, and departments.

Most estimates suggest there are probably more than 2,000 of these. They each have an area of specialization — some much broader than others — but their duties often overlap, making administration more difficult. To complicate things even more, many agencies have

counterparts at the state and local level. Its size, complexity, and overlapping responsibilities leave the federal bureaucracy open to constant attempts to reorganize and streamline.

Congress has the power to create, organize, and disband all federal agencies. Most of them are under the control of the President, although few of them actually have direct contact with the White House. So, the bureaucracy has two masters — Congress and the President. The bureaucracy generally falls into four broad types: Cabinet departments, government corporations, independent agencies, and regulatory commissions

Cabinet departments

- ☒ Department of State
- ☒ Treasury Department
- ☒ Department of Defense
- ☒ Department of Justice
- ☒ Department of the Interior
- ☒ Department of Agriculture
- ☒ Department of Commerce
- ☒ Department of Labor
- ☒ Department of Transportation
- ☒ Department of Housing and Urban Development
- ☒ Department of Health and Human Services
- ☒ Department of Energy
- ☒ Department of Education
- ☒ Department of Veterans Affairs
- ☒ Department of Homeland Security

The Cabinet Departments

The 15 Cabinet departments are each headed by a Secretary who sits on the President's Cabinet. The exception is the Justice Department, which is headed by the Attorney General, who is also a member of the President's Cabinet. The Secretaries are responsible for directing the department's policy and for overseeing its operation. Cabinet secretaries are usually torn between their responsibilities as presidential advisers and heads of their departments.



(As the first woman Cabinet member, Frances Perkins served for 12 years, helping draft legislation such as the Social Security Act and the first federal minimum wage laws.)

Each has a special area of policy, although their responsibilities are still very broad. The organization of each is quite complex, but they have some things in common. All Secretaries have a Deputy or Undersecretary, as well as a host of Assistant Secretaries, who all direct major programs within the department.

Most departments are divided into bureaus, divisions, and sections. For example, the FBI lies within the domain of the Justice Department, and the Secret Service is currently within the Treasury Department agency, but soon to be moved under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security.

Government Corporations

Government corporations do not belong to any department — they stand on their own. Probably the best-known government corporations are the United States Postal Service and Amtrak. They are different from other agencies in that they are businesses created by Congress, and they charge fees for their services. Like any other business, government corporations have

private competition — such as Federal Express and United Parcel Service — and sometimes state competition — such as the New Jersey Transit Authority.



(At the time of its creation, NASA was assumed by many to be a defense-related agency. Today, it brings nations together in highly publicized efforts like the International Space Station shown here.)

Independent Agencies

Independent agencies closely resemble Cabinet departments, but they are smaller and less complex. Generally, they have narrower areas of responsibility than do Cabinet departments. Most of these agencies are not free from presidential control and are independent only in the sense that they are not part of a department.

Congress creates them as separate agencies for many reasons, practical as well as symbolic. For example, when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was established, many members of Congress assumed that it would be a part of the Department of Defense. However, it is an independent agency because the space program has many other purposes than the defense of the nation.



(The ATF is a division of the Department of the Treasury that regulates alcohol, tobacco, and firearms.)

Regulatory Agencies

These agencies regulate important parts of the economy, making rules for large industries and businesses that affect the interests of the public. Because regulatory commissions are "watchdogs" that by their very nature need to operate independently, they are not part of a department, and the President does not directly control most of them. Each commission has from 5 to 11 members appointed by the President, but the President cannot remove them for the length of their terms in office.

Examples of these commissions are the Securities and Exchange Commission, which regulates the stock market, brokers, and investment practices. Another well-known commission is the Federal Reserve Board that governs the nation's monetary policy. The Environmental Protection Agency serves as a guardian over the nation's environment, making and enforcing standards for the industrial and commercial sectors.

With over 2,000 different agencies, the federal bureaucracy is almost certain to run into problems with organization, overlapping responsibilities, and efficiency. Almost every recent President has come into office determined to refashion and trim the bureaucracy. However, none has been able to make more than minor adjustments. Well-established agencies have lives of their own, and are difficult to change. Besides, the country has large, complex, needs requiring special attention. A large bureaucracy is a part of the government's attempt to meet those needs.

Who Are the Bureaucrats?

(Brigadier General Clara L. Adams-Ender, Chief of the Army Nurse Corps, represents the changing face of today's bureaucracy as more women and minorities enter government service.)

The image of the faceless federal employee is completely false.

The 4 million Americans who work for the federal government have many faces and do many jobs. For starters, over 1.4 million are in military service. Overall, they represent much more of a cross section of the American population than do members of Congress or federal judges. About 43% are women, and 28% represent minority groups.



Surprising Facts

Many other misconceptions exist about federal employees. Consider the following:

- Only about 10% of civilian employees work in the Washington, D.C. area. Postal workers and forest rangers live and work across the country, for example. California alone has more federal employees than does the District of Columbia.
- About 30% of the civilian employees work for the army, the navy, the air force, or some other defense agency.
- Even though bureaucrats work at a variety of jobs, most are white-collar workers like secretaries, clerks, lawyers, inspectors, and engineers.
- The number of federal employees per 100 people in the United States population has actually decreased from over 14 per 100 in the early 1970s to a little over 10 per 100 by the late 1990s.



(Rangers like this fellow at the Grand Canyon have many duties. Some are responsible for wildlife preservation, others educate visitors about parks and monuments. Park Service employees also work as attendants at buildings like the White House and the Smithsonian museums.)

What Do Bureaucrats Do?

Most people think that bureaucrats only follow orders. They carry out the decisions that the President or members of Congress make. Of course, anyone who works in the executive

branch is there to implement decisions, but the reality of their work is more complicated. The power of the bureaucracy depends on how much discretionary authority it is granted.

Congress passes laws, but it cannot follow through on all the little decisions that have to be made as the law is translated into action. Bureaucrats, then, may make policies and choose actions that are not spelled out in advance by laws.

Congress delegates substantial authority to administrative agencies in several areas:

1. Paying subsidies — government support money — to farmers, veterans, scientists, schools, universities, and hospitals
2. Transferring money to state and local governments for grants-in-aid, such as highway building, city improvements, or educational programs.
3. Devising and enforcing regulations, such as who owns television stations, what safety features automobiles have, and what kinds of scientific research will be specially encouraged.



Vince and Larry, U.S. Department of Transportation crash test dummies, have been used in ad campaigns encouraging motorists to wear seatbelts and discouraging drunk driving. The Department of Transportation is instrumental in enforcing regulations regarding automobiles, railroads, and aviation.

About 90% of all federal bureaucrats are hired under regulations of the civil service system. Most of them take a written examination administered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and they meet selection criteria, such as training, education levels, or prior experience. Some of them take special tests and meet special criteria, such as postal employees, FBI agents, CIA intelligence officers, foreign-service officers, and doctors in the Public Health Service.

The variety of people who work for the federal bureaucracy is greater than most people realize. They may do scientific research, clerk in welfare offices, decide burn policies for national forests, or do undercover intelligence work. They are all a part of the process whereby the government fulfills the many expectations that Americans have for it today.