WHAT IS THE FEDERAL BUREAUCRACY?

* **What Do Bureaucrats Do?**

The task of the bureaucracy is to implement policies established by congressional acts or presidential decisions. Generally, legislation determines only the guidelines for meeting governmental goals, allowing bureaucrats to develop specific policies and [programs](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/12/outline.aspx). The bureaucracy includes a wide range of activities, from regulating the behavior of individuals and corporations to buying everything from pencils to jet fighters for the government.

* + A **regulation**is a rule that allows the government to exercise control over individuals and corporations by restricting certain behaviors.
    1. Regulations are developed in a process known as the **notice and comment procedure,**in which proposed rules are published in the *Federal*[*Register*](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/12/outline.aspx) and made available for debate by the general public.
    2. The process of devising or modifying regulations is extremely political. Bureaucrats respond to the politics of the situation because:
       1. The bureaucrat’s policy-making power may have been created by a statute that members of Congress could overturn if they disapprove of how bureaucrats use such power.
       2. Bureaucrats need congressional support to protect their budget.
  + Bureaucrats handle government purchases. They may develop purchasing criteria or [work](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/12/outline.aspx) to abide by the criteria already set out in a mandate.
  + **Street-level bureaucrats** are agency employees who directly provide services to the public, such as those who provide job [training](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/12/outline.aspx) services.
  + Research and development are conducted by government scientists.
  + Some bureaucrats spend time managing and directing actions taken by people outside government.
* **Bureaucratic Expertise and Its Consequences**
  + **State capacity** refers to the knowledge, personnel, and institutions that the government requires to effectively implement policies. A bureaucracy of experts is one component of the state capacity. Many critics of the modern bureaucracy cite the abundance of **red tape**, which refers to the unnecessarily complex procedures, or **standard operating procedures**, which are the rules that lower-level bureaucrats must follow when implementing policies, regardless of whether they are applicable to the situation at hand.
  + The **problem of control** refers to the difficulty faced by elected officials in ensuring that when bureaucrats implement policies, they follow these officials’ intentions but still have enough discretion to use their own expertise. Red tape exists as a mechanism to control bureaucrats.
    1. The problem of control is a classic example of the **principal–agent relationship**, which describes the interaction between a principal (like the president or Congress), who needs something done, and an agent (like a bureaucrat), who is responsible for carrying out the principal’s orders. Each principal faces the challenge of motivating the agents to act in the principal’s interests. Because the agent is an expert at the task he has been given, he has private information inaccessible to the principal. The problem then becomes identifying the proper amount of control so that the bureaucrat has guidelines, but his creativity is not stifled.
    2. Another problem that may be encountered in the bureaucracy is **regulatory capture**, a situation in which bureaucrats favor the interests of the groups or corporations they are supposed to regulate at the expense of the general public.
  + Many studies of bureaucracies argue for **neutral competence**, which suggests that bureaucrats should provide expertise without the influence of elected officials, interest groups, or their own political agendas.

HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN BUREAUCRACY

The driving force of the development of bureaucracy has been a combination of new demands from citizens for enhanced government services and the desire of people in government to either respond to these demands or to increase the size and scope of the federal government in line with their own policy goals.

* **The Beginning of America’s Bureaucracy**
  + Until 1928, the American bureaucracy had no more than a few thousand members, and there were only three executive departments (State, Treasury, and War). The early federal government performed a narrow range of tasks, which reflected Americans’ skepticism of government.
  + With the election of Andrew Jackson in 1928 came a spoils system, in which people who had worked on his campaign were rewarded with positions in government. Because these new employees often lacked experience, detailed routines and procedures were developed to guide their actions.
  + As America expanded, so did the size of the federal government. The federal government’s role in daily life was still limited, though it employed significantly more people to support the increased geographic area.
* **Building a New American State: The Progressive Era**
  + Changes in the second half of the nineteenth century dramatically increased the government’s regulatory power. The **federal civil service,** created by the 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act, ensured that bureaucrats would be hired on the basis of merit rather than political connections. Driving these changes was a shift in citizens’ demands. People wanted a greater role for government, both in regulating the behavior of large corporations and delivering more services to citizens.
* **The New Deal, The Great Society, and the Reagan Revolution**
  + The New Deal refers to the government programs implemented during Franklin Roosevelt’s first term as president in the 1930s. These programs were a response to the Great Depression and aimed to stimulate employment, economic growth, and the formation of labor unions. The size, responsibilities, and capacity of the bureaucracy were greatly increased. Many Republicans opposed expansion of the federal government for fear that it could not deliver services efficiently.
  + The Great Society was a further expansion in the size, capacity, and activities of the bureaucracy that occurred during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson (1963–69). Funding was provided for education, transit, health care, and civil rights, to name a few. While these programs dramatically increased political participation by African Americans, many antipoverty programs failed. Many of the people who designed and implement these programs did not understand the complexity of the problems they were trying to address.
  + The Reagan revolution (1980–88) created an opportunity for conservatives to roll back the size and scope of the federal government. The growth of the federal government, however, did not slow. Until the present day, few government programs have been eliminated, and the federal budget has steadily increased.
* **The Modern Federal Bureaucracy**
  + The Executive Office of the President (EOP) contains organizations that support the president and implement presidential policy initiatives. The **Office of Management and Budget**, for example, is responsible for creating the president’s annual budget proposal to Congress, reviewing proposed rules, and other budget-related tasks. Below the EOP are fifteen executive departments, from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The heads of these fifteen organizations make up the president’s cabinet.
  + Below the executive departments, but not subordinate to them, is a set of **independent agencies**, government offices or organizations that provide government services and are not part of an executive department. They carry out specialized functions, such as the Federal Reserve, which manages the money supply, banking system, and interest rates.
  + The federal government serves an enormous range of functions. Furthermore, the division of activities among executive departments and independent agencies does not have an obvious logic. Such organization, or lack thereof, often reflects elected officials’ attempts to shape agency behavior. In general, organizations that are housed within an executive department can be controlled by the president to some extent through his or her appointees, and independent agencies have more freedom from oversight and control by the president and Congress.
* **The Size of the Federal Government**
  + The federal government employs millions of people. The best explanation for the size of the federal government is the size of America itself—a diverse population of over 300 million spread out over an area more than twice the size of the European Union—coupled with America’s position as the most powerful nation in the world. Furthermore, Americans demand services; polls find little demand for less government.
  + Some observers argue that the real explanation has to do with the bureaucracy. This view suggests that the government is so large because bureaucrats are **budget maximizers** who never pass up a chance to increase their own funding, regardless of whether the new spending is worthwhile.

THE HUMAN FACE OF DEMOCRACY

* **Motivations**
  + A large majority of federal employees cite their salary and benefits as prime motivations to work for the federal government. About one-third reported that their main incentive was an interest in public service.
* **Civil Service Regulations**
  + Federal salaries are supposed to be comparable to what people earn in similar, private sector positions. Education determines the positions for which a person is eligible to apply. A set of tests is used to determine who is hired for low-level clerical and secretarial positions, while higher-level jobs are filled by comparing the qualifications and experience of candidates who meet the educational requirements for the position.
  + Civil service regulations provide job security. After three years of satisfactory performance, employees cannot be fired except “for cause.” It is possible, however, to reduce the size of the federal workforce through reductions in force (RIF), which are occasionally carried out when an entire office or program is terminated.
  + The reason so many regulations exist regarding civil service is to separate politics from policy. Making it difficult for elected officials to control the hiring and firing of government employees hinders them from furthering their own political goals.
* **Political Appointees and the Senior Executive Service**
  + Not every federal employee is a member of the civil service. The president appoints over 7,000 individuals to senior positions in the executive branch that are not subject to civil service regulations. Some government agencies have the reputation of being “**turkey farms**,” agencies where campaign workers and donors are often appointed to reward them for their service, because it is unlikely that their lack of qualifications will lead to bad policy.
  + The majority of a president’s appointees are intended to act as the president’s eyes, ears, and hands throughout the executive branch. In many agencies, people who serve in the top positions are members of the Senior Executive Service (SES), who are also exempt from civil service restrictions. The president’s ability to appoint bureaucrats in many different agencies helps him control the bureaucracy. The SES also gives civil servants an incentive to do their jobs well, because it may lead to their promotion in the SES.

HOW AMERICANS SEE BUREAUCRACY

Americans have mixed feelings about the bureaucracy. Negative assessments stem from low levels of trust in government, economic conditions, and media coverage of incompetent bureaucrats. However, Americans tend to have more positive impressions of the government agencies with which they have personal experience.

CONTROLLING THE BUREAUCRACY

Bureaucrats hold significant power to influence government policy. Elected officials must figure out how to reap the benefits of bureaucratic expertise without simply giving bureaucrats free rein to do whatever they want. One strategy is to take away discretion entirely and give simple, direct orders.

The problem with eliminating bureaucrats’ discretion is that this also limits the positive influence of their expertise. Particularly when new policies are being developed, taking away bureaucratic discretion is costly for legislators or presidential appointees, because it forces them to take the time to work out the policy details themselves.

Elected officials must find ways to reduce or eliminate **bureaucratic drift**, the tendency of bureaucrats to implement policies in a way that favors their own political objectives rather than following the original intentions of the legislation. Two common strategies involve changing the way agencies are organized and staffed and using standardized procedures for monitoring agency actions.

* **Agency Organization**

When an agency is first established or given new responsibilities, officials must not only tell the agency what to do, but also ensure that it is properly located within the federal government structure. Limits may also be imposed to restrict who can run the agency.

* **Monitoring**
  + One of the most important ways elected officials prevent bureaucratic drift through **oversight**, which refers to congressional efforts to make sure that laws are implemented correctly by the bureaucracy after they have been passed.
  + Oversight is achieved through requiring bureaucrats to give advance warning of proposed changes before they take effect. This allows for revision of plans.
  + Ideally, all agencies would be inspected as often as possible. **Police patrol oversight** is a method of oversight in which members of Congress constantly monitor the bureaucracy to make sure that laws are implemented correctly. Such oversight is costly, in terms of both money and staff time.
  + More frequently, **fire alarm oversight** is employed when members of Congress respond to complaints about the bureaucracy or problems of implementation only as they arise rather than exercising constant vigilance.
* **Correcting Violations**
  + Legislation or an executive order can send a clear directive to an agency or remove its discretion; tasks and programs can be moved to an agency more closely aligned with elected officials’ goals; political appointees at an agency can be replaced; and agencies can be reorganized. In extreme situations, members of Congress can fail to renew an agency’s statutory authority, in effect putting the agency out of business.
  + One of the most significant difficulties in dealing with bureaucratic drift is disagreement between members of Congress and the president about whether or not an agency is doing the right thing. Such disagreements between the president and Congress can give an agency significant freedom, as long as it retains the support of at least one branch of government.
  + An agency may be able to fend off elected officials’ attempts to take political control if it has a reputation for expertise. Also, if an agency can appeal to groups in society that benefit from agency actions, they can ward off control.

EXPLAINING THE ANOMALIES

Bureaucratic shortfalls are often the result of the complexity of the tasks bureaucrats undertake. The use of standard operating procedures is rooted partly in the complexity of bureaucrats’ tasks—but also in the desire of agency heads and elected officials to control the actions of lower-level staff.

Rules and procedures are needed in any organization to ensure that decisions are made fairly and that they reflect the goals of the organization. However, it is impossible to find procedures that will work this way in all cases, particularly for the kinds of policy decisions made by bureaucrats.

In sum, when government agencies do things that look bizarre or counterproductive, it would be wrong to immediately conclude that the organizations involved are inept or willfully shirking their responsibilities. Rather, they may be doing the best they can to achieve formidable goals, carrying out procedures that are often—but not always—productive, or responding to directives from elected officials.