Bureaucracy and Civil Service

Considered "the fourth branch of government," bureaucracy is the complicated and enormous organizational system used by all governments at the local, state, and national levels to accomplish the mundane tasks necessary to keep government programs up and running.

Those who work for bureaucracies are considered bureaucrats, the countless but unsung government workers ranging from local policemen, teachers, and social workers to clerks and top-level government administrators in Washington, D.C. Despite the necessity of bureaucratic forms of organization for the smooth regulation of American democracy, bureaucracies and bureaucrats are often criticized for assuming too much power over the daily lives of people. By the year 1999, nearly 3 million people were working within the federal bureaucracy in the United States, excluding the 2 million soldiers serving in the military who function as part of the federal bureaucracy as well.

Coined during the early development of European nation-states in the 18th century, the term bureaucracy stems from the French word for a woolen cloth (burel) used to cover a writing desk, or bureau. The 19th-century German sociologist Max Weber, a renowned scholar of sociopolitical development, brought the concept to fruition when he argued that the ideal form of bureaucracy then in existence was the Prussian government system. Weber felt that efficiency was the hallmark of sound government, suggesting that the Prussian government represented a model that offered several ways that efficiency could be promoted at the highest levels of government through specialization, hierarchy, and a formal system of rules and regulations.

Specialization refers to the division of work between several groups in order to carry out the many tasks inherent to the functioning of bureaucracies. Ideally, the division of responsibility is spread broadly according to the expertise of various departments and individuals. Because the size of government bureaucracies at all levels is always on the rise, specialization within any area of government constantly increases as well. For instance, as more national monuments were created by President Bill Clinton in his final year in office, more lower-level bureaucrats were needed within the National Park Service to manage the daily needs of large federal land preserves.

One of the strengths of bureaucracy but ironically often its major weakness, hierarchy refers to the division of power and control within government agencies. From the person in charge of the agency down to the lowest-paid functionaries, hierarchy is necessary to carry out specialized tasks. Without a clear chain of command, bureaucracies can become unwieldy and unresponsive, often creating more problems than solutions. A congressional investigation into the New Mexican Cerra Gordo fire of May 2000, for example, established that a failure in the dispersal of knowledge within the hierarchy of the Department of the Interior created the conditions that gave rise to the devastating fire. This breakdown in the chain of command later resulted in the firing of the superintendent of the Bandelier National Monument for starting the controlled burn that led to the fire, which cost the federal government more than $1 billion.

Without a formal system of rules and procedures, specialization and hierarchy within bureaucracies will fail to work efficiently, and citizens will lose accountability in government.
Often referred to as standard operating procedures, rules are necessary to promote order within bureaucracies while ensuring that government agencies establish routines for complex procedures, to prevent favoritism, and to streamline the decision-making process. Formal rules and procedures govern the ability of bureaucrats at the national and regional levels to advance to a new position, receive a salary increase, and conduct the complex array of tasks necessary within their particular division.

In the United States, the history of the development of bureaucracies stems back to the creation of the republican form of government in 1787. The Constitution makes the President the chief administrator of the Federal Government. Article II, section 3 declares that “he shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” Article II also suggests executive departments by giving the President the power to “require the opinion, in writing, of the principal officer of each of the executive Departments.” Article II anticipates two departments in particular, one for military and one for foreign affairs. It does so by making the President the “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy” and by giving him the power to make treaties and to appoint “Ambassadors and other public Ministers and Consuls.”

When George Washington assumed the presidency, his entire budget in 1790 amounted to a minuscule $1.5 million. A fear of big government dominated the lives of ordinary people, limiting the size of the federal bureaucracy. Only three bureaucratic departments existed at this time: the departments of state, war, and treasury. Because finances were the most pressing issue dominating the operations of the new national government, the Department of the Treasury quickly became the largest bureaucracy in the nation. Though the Treasury Department during Washington's day counted only 70 staffers, today, the department employs more than 150,000 people, indicating the explosive growth in the need for specialization within this particular branch.

Before Andrew Jackson ascended to the presidency in 1828, bureaucracy in federal government was dominated by a core of well-educated elite white men who jealously guarded their access to power and prestige. Jackson campaigned on the issue of infusing more democracy into American government. As president, he instituted the spoils system, a democratic though nepotistic system defined by the staffing of bureaucratic posts with the friends and benefactors of the incoming presidential administration. Throughout the 19th century, patronage in the federal government increasingly became a problem. Each presidential election sparked huge turnover in government positions, with most appointees holding jobs for which they did not have the skills to perform competently. In addition, most appointees were concerned with enriching themselves and performing favors for their patrons, rather than with the government's business. This system is still in place today. When Clinton began his first term in office in 1992, he quickly placed such political supporters as Janet Reno in the top bureaucratic posts of various departments, agencies, and bureaus of the federal government.

Although all elected officials used patronage to some extent, President Andrew Jackson turned it into a powerful political tool during the 1830s, particularly through his manipulation of the U.S. Post Office. Patronage reached its worst level during the Civil War when incoming Republicans from the election of 1860 not only displaced Democrats from their jobs but also accused them of being political enemies and traitors. After the Civil War, the public became increasingly
interested in reforming civil service, compelling politicians to reform the system.

In 1883 the Pendleton Act was passed. Drafted during the Chester A. Arthur administration, the Pendleton Act served as a response to President James Garfield's assassination by Charles Julius Guiteau, a disappointed office seeker. This act placed most government officials on the merit system and marked the end of the “spoils system.” A merit system is one in which government workers are chosen, retained, and promoted based on the quality of their work. The law set up two categories of employment in the executive branch: classified and unclassified. Hiring for classified positions were to be based on merit. In order to measure each person’s merit, potential employees would be given a “practical” examination by an independent agency called the Civil Service Commission. This act put about 10% of the Federal Government’s then 130,000 employees into classified service but gave the President the power to extend that coverage. Theodore Roosevelt was a huge proponent of the merit system and by the end of his term in 1909 2/3 of the 365,000 members of the federal work force fell under the classified category. Today almost 90 percent of all who work for executive branch agencies are covered by the merit system.