

This is "Bureaucracy", section 7.5 from the book A Primer on Politics (v. 0.0). For details on it (including licensing), [click here](#).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#). You can browse or download additional books there. You may also download a PDF copy of [this book](#) (831 KB) or [just this chapter](#) (131 KB), suitable for printing or most e-readers, or a [.zip file](#) containing this book's HTML files (for use in a web browser offline).

**Has this book helped you? Consider passing it on:**



**Help Creative Commons**

Creative Commons supports free culture from music to education. Their licenses helped make this book available to you.



**Help a Public School**

DonorsChoose.org helps people like you help teachers fund their classroom projects, from art supplies to books to calculators.

[← Previous Section](#)

[↑ Table of Contents](#)

[Next Section →](#)

## 7.5 Bureaucracy

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will learn:

1. What is the role and function of the bureaucracy.
2. Why bureaucracies may seem inefficient or inflexible.

The last piece of government we will consider in this chapter are the agencies of government that are assigned with turning all that law into practice. Often, this part of government is called "the bureaucracy," usually not meant as a compliment. Bureaucracy is often used as a dirty word to describe a government out of control. This is unfortunate, because it is actually only a form of organization. **Bureaucracy** refers to organization with a defined chain of heirarchical command; defined tasks for people within that chain; division of labor; clear lines of authority; goal-oriented approach to problems; and adherence to established rules. In fact, this describes most modern human institutions, from the college where you study to the place where you work.

Why do we have a bureaucratic form of organization? Because people have demanded a high degree of accountability and predictability in government, and this is one way to get it. Bureaucracy delegates and handles the details. It provides governance and oversight of the government. Generally speaking, people working in government agencies try to adhere to the laws as written, and sometimes one of the challenges is figuring out just what the legislative body intended.

In the United States, this form of organization grew in part from unhappiness with the

often-corrupt spoils system that was common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many if not most government jobs were handed out to party loyalists as opposed to who might do the job best; as a consequence, contracting and various government jobs often went to the highest bidder—the one who promised to kick back the most of the money made from the job. The civil service system, which was created by Congress following the assassination of newly elected President James Garfield by a disappointed office seeker in 1881, insists that government hire people based on their ability to do whatever job they're being hired for. This is sometimes called the merit system.

This kind of system is not new. The long-term success of both the Chinese and British empires were based on their civil service systems, which required substantial learning and rigorous testing before admission into government service. Although the Chinese system, which was heavily based on knowledge of Confucian classic texts, eventually failed to keep up with a changing world, as it helped maintain the empire for 2,000 years, it can hardly be called a failure.

This gets at the heart of the important trade-off in bureaucratic systems. Because they are rule-based systems, they provide some consistency, predictability and accountability. The goal is that everybody who has to deal with a government agency is treated equally and fairly—treated the same. The trade-off is that this kind of system makes it more difficult for agency officials—bureaucrats, in the term used by people who may be unhappy with the results—to apply judgment to particular circumstances. So a city building inspector is supposed to ensure that every construction project meets particular demands for safety and durability, and isn't supposed to give anybody a little leeway if circumstances warrant. For a contractor or a homeowner doing a remodel, this can be frustrating, but for the next buyer, she or he can be assured that the project was done "up to code" when it was first built. And while we might like our bureaucrats to be more flexible when dealing with the public, too much flexibility can lead to favoritism and looking the other way at the wrong time.

This kind of system is common now in more developed countries. Agencies, staffed with experienced experts, attempt to administer the law, provide services to people, keep an eye on the public purse, and provide feedback to lawmakers about how everything is working. As agency heads often are political appointees, this can create problems for agencies. For example, in 2003, President George W. Bush appointed Mike Brown as head of the *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*, which attempts to help states and communities plan for and respond to both natural and man-made disasters. Brown, an attorney, had a fair amount of legal and government experience, but not necessarily crisis management or managing a large organization. FEMA appeared to be slow to respond to the disaster wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, and Brown was forced to resign. Whether he was responsible for FEMA's slow response, or merely the fall guy for the Bush administration is by no means clear, but someone better suited to the job might have been appointed in the first place.

You have probably had good and bad experiences with government agencies—welfare offices, the Postal Service, even your college if it's a public school and hence an agency of the state government. Either way, one should be careful in generalizing from those experiences. For the most part, however, the people who work in government agencies are just people, trying to balance the needs of their constituents and the demands of policymakers above them. So, for example, people complain about both the expense of welfare programs and object to paying people who aren't working. That pressure leads policymakers to push agencies to keep a close eye on the books, so that agency

employees try harder to ensure that no one gets on welfare illegally (and the incidence of welfare fraud is, in fact, very low in the United States). As pressure mounted to get people off welfare rolls, can it be surprising that getting on them became so much more difficult? In the end, then, the agency and its people become unpopular with both the people they serve and with the people who foot the bill.

How big is the bureaucracy? The U.S. federal government employs about 1.8 million people, plus 515,000 in the U.S. Postal Service, plus about 2.6 million in the armed forces, 1.4 million of whom are classified as active duty. That's actually not greatly different than 40 years ago. You can check the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* for the most current numbers. In the United States, most of the growth in government over the last 50 years has occurred at the state and local level.

The federal government also spends about \$2.8 trillion a year, versus the total U.S. economy of \$13.1 trillion. The U.S. government's size relative to the size of the national economy actually is smaller than that of most other industrialized countries. Government spending was 38.9 percent of GDP in 2011, a down year for the economy. Internationally, the range runs from 8 percent in Burma to 97 percent in Zimbabwe. In terms of tax burden, globally the U.S. is in the middle of the pack, which ranges from 0.9 percent of GDP in Equatorial Guinea to 63.1 percent in Lesotho (both nations in Africa).

The largest U.S. agency is the *Department of Defense* in terms of bodies, with 1 million civilian employees. Social spending, including health care and *Social Security*, is the largest budget category, at about 40 percent of the total federal budget. What you may think of as traditional welfare actually is about 3 percent of the whole budget. Foreign aid, another target of internet outrage, is also around 1 percent. Defense spending is 15 percent.

The federal government, through its agencies, plays a huge role in the economy. And while it hasn't grown that much, some people argue that it should still be smaller. One ongoing suggestion is to privatize certain public services, with the argument that the private sector will do a better job at less price. This might be true, but in the case of transit and postal service, for example, it would mean less and more expensive service for rural areas. In some states, private contractors have used their private status to avoid dealing with legally elected unions or to comply with rules on workplace safety. So, as with most things, there are significant tradeoffs to be made when choosing between public and private service providers. As for efficiency, both Social Security and Medicare have lower expense ratios (overhead) than do their private-sector counterparts. So while not every government agency is a picture of perfect efficiency, not every agency is burning piles of public cash in bonfires.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Bureaucratic forms of organization are common in governments and other organizations throughout the world.
- Bureaucracies trade flexibility for predictability and fairness.


## EXERCISES


1. Think about where you do or have worked. Was it organized bureaucratically? What would it mean for that place to be organized differently?

2. What public agencies have you dealt with on a personal level? What kind of service did you receive?

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

---

 [Previous Section](#)

 [Table of Contents](#)

[Next Section](#) 