The Evolution and Expansion of the Bureaucracy

Inquire: The History of Bureaucracy in America

Overview

Imagine standing in line at the DMV, the passport office, or the post office watching only one person deal with the people in line while three others appear to have nothing to do. Sound familiar?

Most of us have been in situations when the governmental bureaucracy seems completely uncaring, unhelpful, and perhaps intentionally frustrating. However, the reality is that these nameless, faceless “bureaucrats” are human beings trying to do jobs that are at times badly defined with insufficient resources to complete tasks.

Government bureaucracy in America is huge, and often impersonal, but also where “government” really happens in most of our lives. In this lesson, we will take a look at the history of this massive organization and how can we understand its design and purpose.

Big Question: What was the patronage system, and why did the U.S. move to a merit system?

Watch: Jackson - The Father of Patronage

President George Washington truly desired a universally representative bureaucracy that was focused not on political interests, but on the needs of the people. A new development in politics, however, contributed to the growth of the patronage system in American bureaucracy.

The first development was the rise of centralized party politics in the 1820s. After losing the election to John Quincy Adams in 1824, Andrew Jackson took steps to ensure victory in the next election. Jackson turned to a man who was, in many ways, his political opposite: Martin Van Buren.

Van Buren was the father of the “party” system in New York. Beginning with the 1789 election, people voted for candidates they knew — men of leadership and stature. However, Van Buren used newspapers and public campaigns to convince voters that they did not need to know the candidate if they knew the party. Van Buren’s brand of party politics was incredibly successful and he swept into control of New York.

In 1828, Jackson turned to Van Buren, promising him a quick rise into national politics. Jackson used his personal popularity in the South, his name recognition throughout the country, and Van Buren’s “party, not person” campaign to ride a landslide into office in 1828. Party politics had truly arrived in America.
To reward those who supported him, and to solidify the ranks of the Democratic Party, President Andrew Jackson filled the ranks of the bureaucratic offices around the country with thousands of party loyalists. This was the beginning of the spoils system in which political appointments were transformed into political patronage doled out by the president on the basis of party loyalty.

Jackson and Van Buren’s partnership was created out of a desire for success, not political ideology. Jackson, a Southern slave owner, opposed protective tariffs designed to protect the fledgling U.S. textile industry by raising the price of cheap English fabrics. These tariffs would damage the South’s economy by slowing England’s purchase of cotton. However, the factories were in the North, and Van Buren’s New York was a large part of America’s growing Industrial Revolution, so Van Buren supported the tariffs.

Then there was the slavery issue. Jackson and Van Buren stood on opposite sides of the two largest political issues of the day. However, both were pragmatists, willing to trade principle for political success. As a result, the partnership was perfect. Jackson served two terms as president, followed by Van Buren, who served one term. Both men achieved what they wanted… but at what price?

Read: The American Bureaucracy

The Origins of the U.S. Bureaucracy

In the early U.S. republic, the bureaucracy was quite small. This is understandable since the American Revolution was largely a revolt against executive power and the British imperial administrative order. Nevertheless, while neither the word “bureaucracy,” nor its synonyms, appear in the text of the Constitution, the document does establish a few broad channels through which the emerging government could develop the necessary bureaucratic administration.

For example, Article II, Section 2, provides the president the power to appoint officers and department heads. In the following section, the president is further empowered to see that the laws are “faithfully executed.” More specifically, Article I, Section 8, empowers Congress to establish a post office, build roads, regulate commerce, coin money, and regulate the value of money. Granting the president and Congress such responsibilities appears to anticipate a bureaucracy of some size. Yet the design of the bureaucracy is not described, and it does not occupy its own section of the Constitution, as bureaucracy often does in other countries’ governing documents. The design and form were left to be established in practice.

The federal government’s original bureaucracy consisted only of employees from three small departments: state, treasury, and war. In contrast, the executive branch employs almost three million people today. Not only have the numbers of bureaucrats grown, but also the methods and standards for hiring and promoting people have changed dramatically.

Patronage

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 own 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 system (or spoils system) in the U.S. The term “spoils” here refers to paid positions in the U.S. government. As the saying goes, “to the victor [in this case, the incoming president], go the spoils.” Jackson brought a whole new group of Jacksonian Democrats into office. Jackson argued that the spoils system brought a greater rotation of people into office. He thought it was healthy to clear out the government workers who had worked for predecessors, lest they become corrupt. It was also assumed that government would work far more efficiently if the key federal posts were occupied by those already supportive of the president and his policies. This system served to enforce party loyalty by tying the livelihods of the party faithful to the success or failure of their party. The number of federal posts the president sought to use as appropriate rewards for supporters swelled over the following decades.

However, the spoils system also had a number of obvious disadvantages. It was a reciprocal system; clients who wanted positions in the civil service pledged their political loyalty to a particular patron who then provided them with their desired positions. These arrangements directed the power and resources of government toward perpetuating the reward system.

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 agencies were needed to manage the land and its settlement. And as people moved into the new areas, a greatly expanded post office was necessary. The Civil War sparked the creation of thousands of government jobs and new departments in order to handle the warfare demands. After the war, the Industrial Revolution encouraged economic growth and more government agencies to regulate the expanding economy.

The Pendleton Act

Criticism of the spoils system grew, especially in the mid-1870s after numerous scandals rocked the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant. The spoils tradition was further 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 responded to cries for reform with the Pendleton Act, also called the Civil Service Reform Act of 1883. The act established the Civil Service Commission, a centralized agency charged with ensuring that the federal government's selection, retention, and promotion practices were based on open, competitive examinations in a merit system. The passage of this law sparked a period of social activism and political reform that continued well into the 20th century.

At first, only about ten percent of federal employees were members of the civil service. Today, about 85 to 90 percent take this exam.

Growth in the 20th Century

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of great bureaucratic growth in the United States: the Interstate Commerce Commission was established in 1887, the Federal Reserve Board was established in 1913, the Federal Trade Commission was established in 1914, and the Federal Power Commission was established in 1920.

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the United States faced record levels of unemployment and the associated fall into poverty, food shortages, and general desperation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt rapidly reorganized the government’s problem-solving efforts into a series of programs designed to revive the economy, stimulate economic development, and generate employment opportunities. As such, in the 1930s, the federal bureaucracy grew significantly, a growth that continued...
with the start of World War II. By 1940, approximately 700,000 U.S. workers were employed in the federal bureaucracy.

Under President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, that number reached 2.2 million. The federal budget increased to $332 billion as a result of what Johnson called his Great Society program, intended to use the power of government to relieve suffering and accomplish social good. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America, in addition to increasing funding for public education, creating Medicare as a national insurance program for the elderly, and raising standards for consumer products.

All of these new programs required bureaucrats to run them, and the national bureaucracy naturally ballooned. Its size became a rallying cry for conservatives who eventually elected President Ronald Reagan for the express purpose of reducing the bureaucracy. While Reagan was able to work with Congress to reduce some aspects of the federal bureaucracy, he contributed to its expansion in other ways, particularly in his efforts to fight the Cold War.

Reflect: Government Bureaucracy at its Finest...

Poll
Complaints about bureaucrats abound at every level of government in the United States. People complain about everything from the paperwork involved in getting children registered for public schools, to the lines at DMV offices, to the lines at county clerks’ offices, to the hassles in dealing with IRS or any other federal agency.

How about you? Have you ever had to deal with government bureaucracy? If so, was it a pleasant experience or a big hassle?

- Pleasant
- Hassle

Expand: Bureaucracy: The Real Government

“...the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.” - President Ronald Reagan, 1986

Overview
Red tape. Paper pushers. Bean counters. Vast, cookie-cutter buildings with fluorescent lighting and thousands of file cabinets. These are the images that come to mind when many Americans think of government bureaucracy. A bureaucrat is someone who works in an 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.

Throughout history, both small and large nations have elevated certain types of non-elected workers to positions of relative power within the governmental structure. Collectively, these essential workers are called the bureaucracy. A bureaucracy is an administrative group of non-elected officials charged with carrying out functions connected to a series of policies and programs. In the United States, the bureaucracy began as a very small collection of individuals. Over time, however, it grew to be a major force in political affairs. Indeed, it grew so large that politicians in modern times have ridiculed it to great
political advantage. However, the country’s many bureaucrats or civil servants — the individuals who work in the bureaucracy — fill necessary and even instrumental roles in every area of government, from high-level positions in foreign affairs and intelligence collection agencies to clerks and staff in the smallest regulatory agencies. They are hired, or sometimes appointed, for their expertise in carrying out the functions and programs of the government.

Max Weber’s Bureaucracy

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 the 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 the 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:
1. A chain of command that is hierarchical; the top bureaucrat has ultimate control, and authority flows from the top down;
2. A clear division of labor in which every individual has a specialized job;
3. Clearly written, well-established formal rules that all people in the organization follow;
4. A clearly defined set of goals that all people in the organization strive toward;
5. Merit-based hiring and promotion; no granting of jobs to friends or family unless they are the best qualified;
6. 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.

What Does a Bureaucracy Do?

Modern society relies on the effective functioning of government to provide public goods, enhance quality of life, and stimulate economic growth. The activities by which government achieves these functions include — but are not limited to — taxation, homeland security, immigration, foreign affairs, and education. The more society grows and the need for government services expands, the more challenging bureaucratic management and public administration becomes. Public administration is both the implementation of public policy in government bureaucracies and the academic study that prepares civil servants for work in those organizations.

The classic version of a bureaucracy is hierarchical and can be described by an organizational chart that outlines the separation of tasks and worker specialization, while also establishing a clear unity of command by assigning each employee to only one boss. Moreover, the classic bureaucracy employs a division of labor under which work is separated into smaller tasks assigned to different people or groups. Given this definition, bureaucracy is not unique to government but is also found in the private and nonprofit sectors.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Bureaucracy Basics: Crash Course Government and Politics #15
- A video discussing the basics of bureaucracy
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8EQAnKntLs

Max Weber Bureaucracy
- A video discussing Max Weber’s bureaucracy theory and how it made major contributions to our understanding of organizational life
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zp554tcdWO8

AP Gov: Everything to Know About the Bureaucracy
- A video explaining everything you need to know about the bureaucracy
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKds54ksBAo

Lesson Glossary

**bureaucracy**: an administrative group of non-elected officials charged with carrying out functions connected to a series of policies and programs

**bureaucrats**: the civil servants or political appointees who fill non-elected positions in government and make up the bureaucracy

**civil servants**: the individuals who fill non-elected positions in government and make up the bureaucracy; also known as bureaucrats

**merit system**: a system of hiring and promoting based on merit, rather than rewarding friends and political allies

**patronage system**: (also known as the "spoils" system); a system of rewarding friends and political allies in exchange for their support

**public administration**: the implementation of public policy, as well as the academic study that prepares civil servants to work in government

Check Your Knowledge

1. The original bureaucracy of the federal government consisted only of employees from three small departments: state, treasury, and agriculture.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. The Pendleton Act was passed by Congress after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. Max Weber believed in the importance of the bureaucracy when it came to getting things done and believed that a well-organized, rational bureaucracy was the secret behind the success of modern societies.
   - A. True
   - B. False
Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

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