The Models of Bureaucracy and Bureaucrats

Inquire: The Bureaucrats and What They Do

Overview

Who are bureaucrats, and what do they do? Bureaucrats are simply normal, everyday Americans that come from all walks of life: male and female, every ethnic group, every race, and every age group.

Government jobs are often no different than private sector jobs, though they can be very unique. The idea that bureaucrats are nameless, faceless, soulless individuals is simply untrue. They may very well be your friends, your neighbors, or even your relatives — certainly people you know and people very much like you.

Big Question: What are the various models of bureaucracy, and which seems to best fit the U.S.?

Watch: The Face of Democracy

Those who work for the public bureaucracy are nearly always citizens, much like those they serve. As such, they typically seek similar long-term goals from their employment; namely to be able to pay their bills and save for retirement. However, unlike those who seek employment in the private sector, public bureaucrats tend to have an additional motivator: the desire to accomplish something worthwhile on behalf of their country. In general, individuals attracted to public service display higher levels of public service motivation (or PSM). This desire, which most people possess in varying degrees, drives us to seek fulfillment through doing good and contributing in an altruistic manner.

Bureaucrats must implement and administer a wide range of policies and programs as established by congressional acts or presidential orders. Depending upon the agency’s mission, a bureaucrat’s roles and responsibilities vary greatly; from regulating corporate business and protecting the environment to printing money and purchasing office supplies. Bureaucrats are government officials subject to legislative regulations and procedural guidelines. They play a vital role in modern society, holding managerial and functional positions in government, and forming the core of most administrative agencies. Although many top administrators are far removed from the masses, many interact with citizens on a regular basis.

Given the power bureaucrats have to adopt and enforce public policy, they must follow several legislative regulations and procedural guidelines. A regulation is a rule that permits governments to restrict or prohibit certain behaviors among individuals and corporations. The bureaucratic rulemaking process typically creates procedural guidelines, or more formally, standard operating procedures. These are the rules that lower-level bureaucrats must abide by, regardless of the situations they face. Elected officials are regularly frustrated when bureaucrats do not follow the paths they intended. As a result, the bureaucratic process becomes inundated with red tape. This is the name for the procedures
and rules that must be followed to get something done. Citizens frequently criticize the seemingly endless networks of red tape they must navigate in order to effectively utilize bureaucratic services, although these devices are really meant to ensure the bureaucracies function as intended.

Regardless, it is not a competitive system, though it certainly feels that way at times. There is no us vs. them. Instead, it should be us and them, as the people and the government both focus on making forward progress.

Read: Models of Bureaucracy

Moving from a spoils system bureaucracy to a merit-based civil service — as the United States has done since 1883 — while desirable, comes with a number of different consequences. The patronage system tied the livelihoods of civil service workers to their party loyalty and discipline. Severing these ties, as has occurred in the United States over the last century and a half, has transformed the way bureaucracies operate. Without the patronage network, bureaucracies form their own motivations. These motivations, sociologists have discovered, are designed to benefit and perpetuate the bureaucracies themselves.

Bureaucracies are complex institutions designed to accomplish specific tasks. This complexity, and the fact that organizations are composed of human beings, can make it challenging for us to understand how bureaucracies work. Sociologists, however, have developed a number of models for understanding the process. Each model highlights specific traits that help explain the organizational behavior of governing bodies and associated functions.

The Weberian Model

The classic model of bureaucracy is typically called the ideal Weberian model, and it was developed by Max Weber, an early German sociologist. Weber argued that the increasing complexity of life would simultaneously increase the demands of citizens for government services.

Therefore, the ideal type of bureaucracy, the Weberian model, is one in which agencies are apolitical, hierarchically organized, and governed by formal procedures. Furthermore, specialized bureaucrats are deemed better able to solve problems through logical reasoning. Such efforts eliminate entrenched patronage, stop problematic decision-making by those in charge, provide a system for managing and performing repetitive tasks that require little or no discretion, impose order and efficiency, create a clear understanding of the service provided, reduce arbitrariness, ensure accountability, and limit discretion.

The Acquisitive Model

For Weber, as his ideal type suggests, the bureaucracy was not only necessary but also a positive human development. Later sociologists have not always looked so favorably upon bureaucracies, and they have developed alternate models to explain how and why bureaucracies function. One such model is called the acquisitive model of bureaucracy. The acquisitive model proposes that bureaucracies are naturally competitive and power-hungry. This means bureaucrats, especially at the highest levels, recognize that limited resources are available to feed bureaucracies, so they will work to enhance the status of their own bureaucracy to the detriment of others.

This effort can sometimes take the form of merely emphasizing to Congress the value of their bureaucratic task, but it also means the bureaucracy will attempt to maximize its budget by depleting all its allotted resources each year. This ploy makes it more difficult for legislators to cut the bureaucracy’s future budget, a strategy that succeeds at the expense of thrift. In this way, the bureaucracy will
eventually grow far beyond what is necessary and create bureaucratic waste that would otherwise be spent more efficiently among other bureaucracies.

The Monopolistic Model

Other theorists have come to the conclusion that the extent to which bureaucracies compete for scarce resources is not what provides the greatest insight into how a bureaucracy functions. Rather, it is the absence of competition. The model that emerged from this observation is the **monopolistic model**. Proponents of the monopolistic model recognize the similarities between a bureaucracy like the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and a private monopoly, like a regional power company or Internet service provider, that has no competitors. Such organizations are frequently criticized for waste, poor service, and a low level of client responsiveness. Consider, for example, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (BCA), the federal bureaucracy charged with issuing passports to citizens. There is no other organization from which a U.S. citizen can legitimately request and receive a passport, a process that normally takes several weeks. Thus, there is no reason for the BCA to become more efficient, more responsive, or to issue passports any faster.

There are rare bureaucratic exceptions that typically compete for presidential favor: most notably, organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence agencies in the Department of Defense. Apart from these, bureaucracies have little reason to become more efficient or responsive, nor are they often penalized for chronic inefficiency or ineffectiveness. Therefore, there is little reason for them to adopt cost-saving or performance measurement systems. While some economists argue that the problems of government could easily be solved if certain functions are privatized to reduce this prevailing incompetence, bureaucrats are not as easily swayed.

The Weberian model is the model that seems the most analogous to the American system, and the goal of the U.S. government in developing a merit-based bureaucracy. However, over the years, elements of the acquisitive model and the monopolistic model have certainly begun to arise as the bureaucracy has grown. The larger the bureaucracy grows, the more various portions can splinter and begin to fight for money, control, and power within the government.

Reflect: How Would You Describe Bureaucracy?

Poll

When you think of the bureaucracy, do you think of government employees as helpful and concerned about your issues and needs, as rude and indifferent toward helping you and the other people they serve, or somewhere in the middle?

- helpful and concerned about my issues and needs
- rude and indifferent toward helping me and the other people they serve
- somewhere in the middle

Expand: The Face of the Bureaucrats

Overview

The image of the faceless federal employee is a completely false image. The four 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 the District of Columbia.
- About 30% of 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 in the United States has actually decreased in size, from over 14 per 100 people in the early 1970s, to a little over ten per 100 people by the late 1990s.

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 smaller 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:

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

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 meet selection criteria, such as training, education levels, or prior experience. Some bureaucrats 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 part of the process whereby the government fulfills the many expectations that Americans have today.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Controlling Bureaucracies: Crash Course Government and Politics #17

- A Crash Course video talking about the different methods the branches of government use to manage bureaucracies
What is BUREAUCRACY? What does BUREAUCRACY mean? BUREAUCRACY meaning, definition and explanation.

- A video answering the question, “What is bureaucracy?”
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO2M-6KvAOs

Bureaucracy Basics: Crash Course Government and Politics #15
- A video discussing the basics of bureaucracies
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8EQAnKntLs&t=6s

Lesson Glossary

acquisitive model: model of bureaucracy in which bureaucracies are seen as naturally competitive and power-hungry

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

monopolistic model: model of bureaucracy in which bureaucracies are viewed as similar to private monopolies without competition, resulting in waste, poor service, and low levels of client responsiveness

regulations: a rule that permits governments to restrict or prohibit certain behaviors among individuals and corporations

Weberian model: model of bureaucracy in which agencies are apolitical, hierarchically organized, and governed by formal procedures; seen as the ideal model by Weber

Check Your Knowledge

1. The model that seems the most analogous to the American system, and the goal of the U.S. government in developing a merit-based bureaucracy, is the Weberian model.
   A. True
   B. False

2. The monopolistic model proposes that bureaucracies are naturally competitive and power-hungry.
   A. True
   B. False

3. All federal bureaucrats are hired under regulations of the civil service system.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
Citations

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