

[print page](#)[close window](#)

bureaucracy

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. 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 jealousy 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. 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.

Bureaucracy in the United States remained limited until the late 19th century, when massive and rapid industrialization necessitated the enlargement and creation of new departments at all levels of state and federal government. Corporations run by robber-barons like Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and John D. Rockefeller negatively impacted the daily lives of American workers by denying them health and unemployment insurance while forcing them to work six days a week. In response to the stranglehold of major corporations on national life, the public called for an enlargement of government agencies and the bureaucracies necessary to carry out reforms. During the Progressive Era, a time shortly after the turn of the century when the federal government expanded enormously in response to social problems, the idea of limited government gave way to a regulatory system of federal bureaucracy. For example, the Department of Commerce and Labor was created in 1903 to extend government control over economic and labor issues embroiling the nation. (In a later move to promote efficiency, the department was split into two agencies.)

During the 1930s and 1940s, when the Great Depression resulted in unemployment for as much as 25% of the American population, the size and scope of federal bureaucracy increased yet again. This enlargement of bureaucracy was viewed as the only solution to save capitalism from demise and the nation from internal conflicts. The creation of the "welfare state" under the New Deal by President Franklin D. Roosevelt required the adoption of numerous new departments at the federal level, including the Soil Conservation Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Other acts were passed to provide a safety net for American workers who were traditionally at-risk for poverty if they lost their jobs. The Social Security Act, for instance, established the right of American workers to receive unemployment insurance, worker-compensation benefits, and a guaranteed retirement savings plan. To regulate American finance, Roosevelt increased the scope of bureaucracies to insure bank deposits, home loans, and monitor the stock exchange. Despite the successes achieved by these programs, many Americans currently lament Roosevelt's increase in the size of government and the bureaucracies necessary to carry out government programs. They argue that Americans have come to depend on bureaucracy for almost every aspect of their lives.

During World War II, American bureaucracy continued to expand, fed in part by massive wartime emergencies at home and abroad. Indeed, during each major conflict in American history (the Civil War, World War I, and World War II), the federal government enlarged bureaucracies to protect the American citizenry. The hiring of thousands of administrators within the federal government during World War II carried over into peacetime.

In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson expanded the scope of federal government through his War on Poverty

(WOP) programs. Designed to reduce rampant urban and rural poverty within one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the WOP campaign created dozens of new government agencies. By the 1970s, public calls for government to expand into the environmental sector led to the creation of such massive bureaucracies geared toward promoting human health as the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Federal Energy Office.

A downside to the proliferation of bureaucracies has developed in the minds of many Americans since the 1960s. The expansion of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to combat the growth of political dissent during the 1960s suggested to many people that the role of the federal government in their daily lives was becoming too great. Others lamented that the cost of government had risen to unprecedented levels, symbolized by President Ronald Reagan's increase in the federal deficit and enlargement of the nation's military infrastructure to combat the former Soviet Union in the Cold War.

In the 1990s, a Republican-led effort to reduce the size of government became a mainstream movement, prompting even the Democratic Clinton to publicly proclaim that the era of big government was over. Although most Americans support the idea of reducing the size of the federal bureaucracy, few are willing to sacrifice their favorite federal programs. Likewise, state governments enjoy exercising more control over programs within their borders but are reluctant to take on the task of raising taxes for their citizens in order to pay for them—a job that most state governors believe is best left to the federal government. Supporters of the federal bureaucracy warn that a reduction will result in a loss of control at the federal level, which will in turn lead to a reversal in such crucial areas as civil rights, women's rights, workers' rights, welfare, and health care.

Crucial but controversial, the proliferation of bureaucracy over the last 200 years has led to unprecedented improvements in the social lives of American people but at an economic and intellectual cost that many regret. If the past is any indication of the future, bureaucracies will continue to grow as more problems develop that require government solutions.

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[back to top](#)

FURTHER READING

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CITATION: MLA STYLE

"bureaucracy." *American Government*. ABC-CLIO, 2009. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.
<<http://www.americangovernment.abc-clio.com>>.

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