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The Bureaucracy

Explain how the bureaucracy carries out the responsibilities of the federal government.

When government is asked to do something – and it is asked a lot – somebody has to do it. Democratic governments have been instituted to serve the people. The Legislative Branch and their respective legislatures respond to the needs of the people by writing laws. In our United States government Congress is responsible for creating public policy. The Executive Branch is given the primary function to implement those policies. The President of the United States and his staff execute the laws. This is no small task. The large arm of the executive branch responsible for translating laws into action is called the Federal Bureaucracy. The Federal Bureaucracy is the government means to a public policy end. When we want our government to do something, it is the Federal Bureaucracy who is responsible for doing it. The Federal Bureaucracy transforms our wishes into realities. The Federal Bureaucracy transforms Federal policy into action. Those individuals who transform public policy into actionable services are Federal bureaucrats. As the action figures in our government they come under frequent criticism and attack. Characterized by its hierarchical organization and specialization, the ever-growing Federal Bureaucracy has been asked to address more and more. **The federal bureaucracy is a powerful institution implementing federal policies with sometimes-questionable accountability.** With its size comes inefficiency and unresponsiveness making us wonder if we can live with it. One thing about the Federal Bureaucracy is certain, however, we cannot live without it.

The Federal Bureaucracy is characterized by its organization, specialization and expertise. Whereas patronage appointments –that is by friends and patrons of the president – once exclusively staffed the executive branch the Civil Service Act of 1883 established the merit system. Today the vast majority of the Federal Bureaucracy is made up of career civil servants.

The Federal Bureaucracy tends to be organized hierarchically. Underneath the President of the United States and his White House staff and executive office are the Cabinet Departments.

Each Cabinet Department has a head, usually called a Secretary, with multiple levels and layers of responsibility. The most noted Cabinet Departments are:

- The State Department – responsible for foreign policy
- The Treasury Department – responsible for monetary policy
- The Department of Defense – responsible for national security

Yet other Cabinet Departments are growing in stature as federal priorities change:

- The Department of Education is trying to reform public education in America
- The Department of Health and Human Services is implementing many changes in the way health care will be provided to millions of Americans.

In addition to the Cabinet Departments, the Federal Bureaucracy is also made up of Independent agencies like NASA, the CIA and the EPA.

- NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, studies and explores regions outside of our atmosphere.
- The CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency, gathers and interprets foreign intelligence in order to keep us safe at home.
- The EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency, develops policies and programs to clean our environment.

The Federal Bureaucracy is also made up of certain government corporations like the United States Postal Service and Amtrak: one delivers our mail and the other delivers us to our destination via rail.

The Federal Bureaucracy is organized in order to deliver government services as efficiently as possible. Considering the number of tasks and the diversity of constituents this is not always easy.

When given the responsibility to help execute the laws, executive departments, agencies, commissions and government corporations are called upon to perform numerous tasks. In no small way they help to write regulations, enforce existing law and adjudicate disputes. The functions of our three branches, from writing, enforcing and interpreting laws, can all be found in the day-to-day operations of the federal bureaucracy. In that way our federal bureaucracy plays an important role in national policy-making.

Congress often intentionally passes vague laws. This gives either intended or unintended power to federal bureaucrats who are then left to interpret these laws in the field. In other words, regulators of the federal government are often given legislative authority. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency can write rules and regulations that affect and impact air quality. An Act of Congress authorizes them to do so and may even provide the necessary funding but the details are written and enforced by bureaucrats.

For many this is a direct affront on constitutional government. In essence, it is argued, unelected government workers often act without sufficient checks. Needless to say, it puts every citizen on guard as critical watchdogs overseeing government activity that often goes unnoticed.

Adjudication of disputes appropriately falls upon our court system. Yet as our vast bureaucracy has grown exponentially so too has its power to use its discretionary authority to determine resolutions. These administrative tribunals are not mentioned in

the U.S. Constitution. Nor will you find much about them in the political science literature. The federal bureaucracy exercises more and more judicial authority.

For many this is worrisome. Some argue that a shadow government, lying outside of normal checks and balances, often rules on our most important disputes. Keeping an eye on these activities is not easy.

An example of one such tribunal is the Interstate Commerce Commission. These appointed officials are responsible for enforcing laws that govern transportation which often include the regulation of shipping rates. When disputes arise the Commission has the authority to render a decision with the authority of law.

This is but another example how the aggrandizement of the United States government continues to pose challenges that the framers had not anticipated.

Iron Triangles, or issue networks as they are now called, are not easy to understand. They are nevertheless the keys to understanding how public policy is both made and sustained. Public policies are a byproduct of relationships between Congressional committees, related interest groups and specific executive agencies. Because all three groups share a particular interest they guard specific policies from outsiders. This makes it nearly impossible to change specific government policies despite common sense objections. Iron Triangles become entrenched in time and help explain why it is so difficult to reduce the size and scope of the national government.

Political patronage, civil service and merit system reforms in promoting professionalism, specialization and neutrality, all impact the effectiveness of the bureaucracy. While most of the federal bureaucracy is comprised of career civil servants, there are enough direct political appointees to make for both political and partisan clashes. Remember it was Ronald Reagan who said “government is not the solution . . . government is the problem.” Over time Americans have grown frustrated with the unresponsiveness of the Federal Bureaucracy just as Max Weber warned over one hundred years ago.

When government is asked to do something – and it is asked a lot – somebody has to do it. Those individuals who transform public policy into actionable services are Federal bureaucrats. As the action figures in our government they come under frequent criticism and attack. Characterized by its hierarchical organization and specialization, the ever-growing Federal Bureaucracy has been asked to address more and more. With its size comes inefficiency and unresponsiveness making us wonder if we can live with it.

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