CHAPTER 13 The Bureaucracy

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

* Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
* List key factors that have contributed to the growth of the U.S. government bureaucracy.
* Explain the difficulties that surround efforts to reduce the size of the bureaucracy.
* Outline the basic types of organizations that make up the bureaucracy.
* Explain why presidents often feel they have inadequate control of the bureaucracy.
* Describe the formal and informal processes of bureaucratic policymaking.
* Explain the rational-comprehensive model of decision making, and compare it with real-world decision making.
* Give the main reasons why policies fail at the implementation stage.
* Describe the three major initiatives to reform the bureaucracy.

# The Bureaucracy and the Challenge of Democracy

Powerful reasons were needed to justify the invasion of Iraq. President Bush turned to the intelligence community for the rationale he needed. One of the strongest pieces of evidence was the assertion that one of the 9/11 hijackers had met secretly with Iraqi officials a few months prior to the attacks in the United States This information later proved to be false, and thus an error by the bureaucracy partially influenced a president to initiate a war for the wrong reasons. Additionally, no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, which created more bad news for the White House. Once again, the finger was pointed at the bureaucracy, in this instance the CIA, which may have caved in to pressure by the White House to provide a rationale for the war. Either way, the bureaucracy was wrong in the information it provided to the White House.

Every day, through the bureaucracy, the government is involved in hundreds of situations that involve conflicts among the values of freedom, order, and equality. Departments, bureaus, and agencies are required to make rules, to adjudicate, and to exercise administrative discretion to fill in the details left out of legislation passed by Congress. In their effort to achieve legislative goals, do bureaucrats go too far? Does the bureaucracy try to do too much? Is it out of control and out of touch?

From a majoritarian standpoint, the answers to these questions would seem to be yes. In recent years, the public has shown a preference for a smaller bureaucracy. Once again, however, we see the impact of pluralism on the American system. The various bureaus, agencies, and departments exist to do what some part of the population (call it a faction or an interest group) wants government to do. Often, the bureaucracy balances competing interests, thus doing a job political scientists think is essential if pluralism is to be democratic.

Efforts to reform the bureaucracy may run into trouble because of pluralist politics. Interest groups that have built up contacts with existing agencies will fight reorganization. Deregulation offers another method of reducing the bureaucracy, but it raises anew the fundamental questions related to the scope of government. It may provide greater freedom, but it may also result in inadequate protection, thus undermining order.

Chapter Overview

## Organization Matters

The large, complex mass of organizations that administer the nation’s laws and implement government policies is known as the bureaucracy. Although there is no perfect way to structure all bureaucracies, it is clear that a bureaucracy’s organization directly affects its ability to perform effectively. The main function of the bureaucracy is to create order out of chaos. The British navy’s problems with German U-boats during World War I and World War II provide a good example of how to establish order in a chaotic society. Although the solution is never perfect, it worked well enough to defeat the U-boat menace. Clearly, organization matters.

## The Development of the Bureaucratic State

Government at all levels has grown enormously in the twentieth century. This growth results from several factors.

* Increasing complexity of society and the range of functions embraced by government
* Changing attitudes about government’s responsibilities to society and government’s role in the marketplace
* Creation of the belief that certain segments of our society deserve some government support
* Ambitious officials who wish to expand their organizations to serve their clients more fully

On the whole, the public has little confidence in the government, but cuts in the government’s size are difficult, because each part of the bureaucracy does a job some part of society wants done. Interest groups with a stake in an agency or department will often organize to resist cuts. Pressure to restrict the federal bureaucracy but preserve government programs has led to a gradual devolution of authority to state and local governments and increasing use of private for-profit firms and nonprofit organizations to deliver government services.

## Bureaus and Bureaucrats

The bureaucracy is not a unified entity but a collection of dozens of government organizations, including the following:

* Fifteen departments—cabinet-level organizations that cover broad areas of government responsibility and contain within them numerous subsidiary offices and bureaus
* Independent agencies and regulatory commissions—not part of any cabinet department and controlled to varying degrees by the president
* Government corporations—organizations that provide services, such as mail delivery and passenger rail, that could be provided by the private sector but have been made public because Congress decided it better serves the public interest

Many of the 2.7 million workers in the federal bureaucracy are part of the civil service, a system established to fill government jobs on the basis of merit rather than political patronage. The overall composition of the federal bureaucracy generally mirrors the population, and a much broader spectrum of Americans are represented in high-level civil service positions than either high-level corporate managers or high-level political appointees.

Although presidential appointees fill the top policymaking jobs in the federal bureaucracy, the bulk of civil service employees are independent of the chief executive. Even if they support the objectives of the president, agency administrators are constrained by demands from members of Congress and the scrutiny of organized groups attentive to agency policy choices.

## Administrative Policymaking: The Formal Processes

Congress gives the cabinet-level departments and agencies it creates administrative discretion, that is, authority to make policy within certain guidelines. Sometimes the guidelines are vague. The wide latitude Congress gives the bureaucracy sometimes leads to charges that the government is out of control. But Congress does have the power to review the legislation that establishes bureaucratic organizations. It also controls the purse strings. Informal contacts between members of Congress and agency personnel also help Congress communicate its intentions to the bureaucracy.

Administrative discretion is exercised through rule making—the quasi-legislative process of formulating and issuing regulations. Regulations have the force of law. They are created in accordance with a formal procedure that allows affected parties to register their views. Regulations serve to balance the needs of society. Regulation-writing agencies attempt to strike a compromise between interests, but frequently compromises fail to please either side.

## Administrative Policymaking: Informal Politics

Real-world decision making in government does not really resemble the textbook rational-comprehensive model, in which administrators rank their objectives and carefully weigh the costs and benefits of all possible solutions to a problem. In practice, policymakers find that their values often conflict; that their time, information, and options are limited; and that the decisions that are best in theory may in reality be politically impracticable. Policymaking becomes a matter of muddling through and tends to be incremental, with policies changing only very gradually over time.

Bureaucracies develop written rules and regulations to promote efficiency and fairness. In addition, certain unwritten rules and norms evolve, influencing the way people act on the job. Employees in a bureaucracy—the bureaucrats—wish to advance their careers, and as a result they may avoid rocking the boat, that is, engaging in behavior that might violate written or unwritten canons.

## Problems in Implementing Policy

Policies do not always do what they are designed to do. To find out why, you have to look beyond the process of policymaking to policy implementation. Policies may fail because the directives concerning them or their implementation may be vague or because lower-level officials have too much discretion. Programs may fail because of the complexity of government; the necessary coordination among federal agencies or among federal, state, and local agencies may be impossible to achieve. Policies may also fail because policymakers overestimate the capacity of an agency to carry them out. While bureaucrats have often been criticized for having too much discretion, more recently critics have charged that bureaucrats need more flexibility to be able to tailor their solutions to fit the specific context.

## Reforming the Bureaucracy: More Control or Less?

Because organization makes a difference in a bureaucracy’s ability to achieve its goals, people in government often tinker with organizational designs to make bureaucracy more effective. Three different reform strategies have emerged in recent years: deregulation, competition and outsourcing, and performance standards. Many people feel that society is too regulated, and so push for deregulation of government’s rules and regulations. In other words, they push for more freedom and less order. Competition is about using more business practices, like supply and demand, to provide more and better services at a cheaper price. The use of performance standards was mandated when Congress passed the Government Performance and Results Act. The act requires each agency to develop strategic plans describing overall goals, objectives, and performance plans, and to publish reports with performance data on each measure.

Key Terms

bureaucracy

bureaucrats

departments

independent agencies

regulatory commissions

government corporations

civil service

administrative discretion

rule making

regulations

incrementalism

norms

implementation

regulation

deregulation

competition and outsourcing

Government Performance and Results Act

# Research and Resources

The U.S. government bureaucracy is large and complex, but there are some good reference tools to help you make sense of it. One of the best online sources is the *United States* *Government Manual*, available online at <<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/gmanual/index.html>>, published annually, and identified as the official handbook of the federal government. The website contains detailed information on all three branches of government as well as extensive material on departments and agencies. Typically, each agency description provides a list of the principal officials, a summary of the purposes and role of the agency, an outline of the legislative or executive functions, and a description of the agency’s activities. For links to home pages of individual federal departments and agencies, check out <<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/agencies.html>>.

The *Federal Regulatory Directory*, 13th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press 2007), contains much of the same information found in the *United States Government Manual*, though this work is not updated as frequently. It does have some other useful features, however. It opens with an introductory essay on the regulatory process, exploring the history of regulation and current trends and issues. There are detailed profiles of major regulatory agencies, including analyses of their past history, current issues, and future prospects. Biographical sketches of major administrators within each agency are included also.

# Using Your Knowledge

1. Using the *Federal Regulatory Directory* and the *United States Government Manual*, prepare a profile of at least two government departments. Outline the functions, present status, and future prospects of each. How large are their budgets? How many people does each employ? Have these figures increased or decreased? Have its responsibilities grown or decreased recently?

2. Visit the websites for the agencies you profiled in question 1. Describe the information presented. Note the similarities and differences between the sites. What types of users would each site serve best?

# Getting Involved

As the chapter noted, the national government employs people all over the country in virtually every field imaginable. If you are interested in government, you may want to consider a career working in one of the many departments, bureaus, or agencies of the federal system. As noted in the text, all federal government employees (except for a very few political employees at the highest levels) are part of the civil service merit system. What should you do if you are interested in joining their ranks?

In the past, the Office of Personnel Management played the biggest role in the hiring process, but now the process is more decentralized. This means that in addition to visiting the Federal Job Information Center in your area and filling out Standard Form 171 (SF 171), the basic résumé form required in order to apply for most federal jobs, you’ll also want to contact particular agencies where you think your talents and interests could be put to use. If you are interested in positions in the area of international affairs, be sure to look at the Getting Involved section in Chapter 20.

There are many useful resources to help you learn more about the federal job-seeking process. Here are three.

* Damp, Dennis. *The Book of U.S. Government Jobs: Where They Are, What’s Available, and How to Get One*. 10th ed. McKees Rock, PA: Bookhaven Press, 2008.
* Krannich, Ronald, and Caryl Krannich. *Find a Federal Job Fast! Cutting the Red Tape of Getting Hired*. 4th ed. Woodbridge, VA: Impact Publications, 1998.
* Troutman, Kathryn, and Emily Troutman. *The Student’s Federal Career Guide: 10 Steps to Find and Win Top Government Jobs and Interships*. Baltimore, MD: Resume Place, 2004.

Be warned: despite the titles of these books, getting a government job is not always an easy process.

Sample Exam Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which office, run by Undersecretary Douglas Feith, released much of the incorrect intelligence used to justify the war in Iraq?

a. Central Intelligence Agency’s Counterintelligence Unit

b. Department of Justice’s Terrorism Department.

c. Department of Defense’s Office of Special Plans

d. Department of Justice’s National Security Unit

e. Department of Defense’s Office of Intelligence and Terrorism

2. How does the U.S. government compare to other Western democracies?

a. is relatively larger

b. is relatively smaller

c. offers a more extensive array of services

d. imposes a higher tax burden on its citizens

e. employs a higher proportion of the nation’s workers

3. What new department did President Bush create after the 9/11 attacks?

a. Department of Commerce

b. Department of Justice

c. Department of Civil Service

d. Department of Terrorism

e. Department of Homeland Security

4. What do we call the large units of the executive branch, whose heads are the members of the president’s cabinet?

a. departments

b. government corporations

c. regulatory commissions

d. independent agencies

e. none of the above

5. Why did we create the regulatory commissions?

a. political pressure

b. need of Congress to control consumers and businesses

c. to give more power to interest groups

d. to police unfair business practices or protect consumers

e. to protect new market monopolies

6. How does our government usually reduce government?

a. It cuts specific programs.

b. It cuts personnel.

c. It cuts funding.

d. It combines agencies into one department.

e. It splits departments into specific agencies.

7. Approximately how many civilian employees work for our national bureaucracy?

a. 1.4 million

b. 1.9 million

c. 2.2 million

d. 2.7 million

e. 3.5 million

8. Approximately how many presidential appointees need to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate?

a. 250

b. 400

c. 625

d. 800

e. 975

9. What term do we use to describe the formal administrative procedure that results in the issuance of regulations?

a. adjudication

b. rule making

c. reorganization

d. implementation

e. incrementalism

10. In most situations, how does our bureaucracy create the “best” policy?

a. outsourcing

b. using common sense

c. asking Congress

d. asking the president

e. none of the above

11. What do we call the informal and unwritten rules of behavior in government agencies?

a. incrementalism

b. patronage

c. norms

d. civil service

e. deregulation

12. Why don’t administrative decisions follow the rational-comprehensive model?

a. Policymakers have precise goals and values.

b. Policymakers typically consider only a limited range of feasible solutions.

c. Administrative decisions are rarely incremental.

d. Administrative decisions are never guided by evaluations of efficiency.

e. Congress controls most administrative decisions.

13. Why do so many bureaucrats follow the book?

a. Following the book means following the law.

b. Following the book is easiest.

c. Following the book means being fair and impartial.

d. Following the book ensures a healthy governmental agency.

e. Following the book ensures congressional oversight and regulation.

14. Why do policies sometimes fail at the implementation stage?

a. Policy directives are too precise.

b. Coordination among implementing agencies is too complex and difficult.

c. Policymakers have clear expectations about an agency’s capabilities.

d. Government functions are too simplistic and easy to understand.

e. All of the above.

15. When policies change slowly, bit by bit, step by step, over time, policymaking is said to be characterized by what?

a. planning-programming budgeting system

b. total quality management

c. management by objective

d. incrementalism

e. merit criteria

16. What have recent efforts to reform the bureaucracy tended to emphasize?

a. less reliance on the mechanisms of free markets

b. more reliance on the mechanisms of free markets

c. regulation

d. centralization of power in Washington, D.C.

e. elimination of clear performance standards

17. Where do departments, agencies, and corporations receive their official mandates from?

a. Congress

b. the president

c. Constitution

d. electorate

e. citizen groups

18. In the last six years, by about what percentage has contracting out government programs and services to nonprofits and for-profit organizations grown?

a. 50 percent

b. 75 percent

c. 100 percent

d. 150 percent

e. 200 percent

19. According to the text, which of the following did *not* spur the growth of bureaucracy?

a. scientific and technological change

b. desire to regulate business

c. rise of the belief in progress

d. belief that government should play a role in social welfare programs

e. increase in the simplicity and ease of society

20. What was the civil service merit system supposed to reduce?

a. patronage

b. competence

c. decentralization

d. pork barrel politics

e. incrementalism

21. What term refers to the process of putting specific policies into effect?

a. incrementalism

b. implementation

c. procedural processing

d. adoption

e. none of the above

22. What was the major problem with relief efforts after Katrina from a bureaucratic position?

a. There was no problem; it just takes time to organize large relief efforts.

b. There were equipment delays and foul-ups in scheduling.

c. Congressional oversight got in the way because they kept changing directives.

d. State and local officials interfered and slowed down federal relief efforts.

e. There was no clear chain of command; this made coordinating relief much more difficult.

23. What is the new major initiative that holds agencies accountable for their performance?

a. Pendleton Act

b. Government Performance and Results Act of 1993

c. Reinvention of Government Act of 1996

d. America First and Foremost Initiative

e. Accountability Act of 1998

24. Which of the following is an example of an independent agency?

a. National Endowment for the Arts

b. Office of Management and Budget

c. U.S. Postal Service

d. National Aeronautics and Space Administration

e. Department of Education

25. The tendency for big government to endure reflects the tension between what two philosophies?

a. law and order

b. freedom and equality

c. majoritarianism and pluralism

d. capitalism and communism

e. laissez faire and socialism

Essay Questions

1. Why was the civil service system introduced, and what is it designed to do? Why might the system be frustrating to presidents?

2. Explain the objectives and content of recent efforts to reform our bureaucracy.

3. What were the major problems associated with reacting to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina? Discuss the difficulties and the reforms that were made to correct them.

4. What went wrong with the justification for the war in Iraq. What reforms could be put in place to prevent this in the future?

5. Compare the successes and failures of the new Homeland Security Department.

Answers to Multiple-Choice Questions

1. c

2. b

3. e

4. a

5. d

6. b

7. d

8. d

9. b

10. e

11. c

12. b

13. a

14. b

15. d

16. b

17. a

18. c

19. e

20. a

21. b

22. e

23. b

24. d

25. c