

DEMOCRACY REFORM PRIMER SERIES

Political Appointees to the Federal Bureaucracy

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Summary

The United States has an unusually large number of leadership positions filled by political appointees with approximately 4,000 civilian political appointees in non-advisory roles at any given time. For comparison, other developed democracies have between a few dozen and a few hundred political appointees. Some observers attribute the failures of federal agency performance to the large number of appointed positions, many regularly vacant because of political dysfunction and others filled with unqualified political appointees who interfere with career professionals. For others, the insulated nature of the career bureaucracy creates performance problems. Reformers advocate cuts or expansions in the number of political appointees to improve performance. Data shows that the number of appointed positions influences how responsive government agencies are to elected officials and the quality of organizational performance. We want agencies to follow the directions of people we elect to office and we want agencies to perform effectively, yet these goals often work against one another. An agency filled with all political appointees might be responsive to the President, but such an agency might not be particularly effective.

While concerned about performance, elected officials' choices are not driven solely by performance concerns. Presidents and their parties in Congress often use political appointments as a tool to further control and patronage. New presidents tend to increase the number of appointees when they replace a president from the other party. They also place more appointees in agencies whose natural direction, either due to mission or personnel, differs from the president's view.

Compared to careerist leaders, political appointees are hired and fired at will; making them much more responsive to elected officials. Due to the diversity of tasks within the federal government, it can be difficult to compare federal bureaus to one another and demonstrate progress or failure. When examining case studies of specific agencies across years, anecdotes suggest political appointees in leadership roles exacerbate dysfunction. Appointee-run programs and agencies experience more turnover, longer vacancies, and leaders with less subject and public management experience than programs and agencies run by career professionals. Scholars theorize that reducing the number of Senate-confirmed appointees could improve agency performance by minimizing long-standing vacancies. Studies also show that some appointee leadership appears helpful for improving accountability and performance within agencies, suggesting a balanced approach to the federal bureaucracy could be critical.

