"Who Are the Bureaucrats and What Do They Do?"

The federal bureaucracy employs nearly 4 million civilians and 1.4 million military personnel. These employees are spread across 14 Cabinet-level agencies and over 2,000 agencies, bureaus, divisions, branches, and other subunits of the federal executive branch. Some of the agencies are directly responsible to the president, such as the Department of Defense, while others operate fairly independently (e.g. U.S. Postal Service, Amtrak, etc.). Only 15 percent of bureaucrats actually work in Washington, D.C.; most are spread in federal agency branch offices across the countries (the National Park Service). California alone has more federal employees than does the nation’s capital. Also, more than 20 percent of bureaucrats work in defense agencies. Less than 10 percent work in welfare agencies. Most bureaucrats are white-collar workers like secretaries, clerks, lawyers, inspectors, and engineers. Bureaucrats are more broadly representative of the American populace than any other branches of government such as the legislative and judicial branches. The bureaucracy employs more women and minorities than any other governmental entity in the country.


All bureaucrats share one job: to implement and execute the laws. Implementation covers a broad range of bureaucratic activities: approving Social Security applications, swearing in newly minted U.S. citizens at the Immigration and Naturalization Office (part of the Department of Homeland Security), and monitoring airline traffic for the Federal Aviation Administration. Because Congress and the president could never pass laws that are detailed enough to execute themselves, they give bureaucrats the discretion to implement the laws in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Making regulations or rulemaking are the formal instructions that the government issues for implementing laws. It is an Agricultural Department rule that tells meat processors how to handle food; it is Environmental and Protection Agency rule that tells auto manufacturers how much mileage their cars must provide; and it is an Immigration and Naturalization service rule that tells immigrants how long they can stay in the country.

Unless dealing with the bureaucracy directly, most Americans are completely unaware of the extent that the bureaucracy has in their lives. Such daily tasks as putting on makeup, making a pot of coffee, setting your clock for Daylight Savings Time, using a cell phone, filling a credit card application, boarding an airplane, taking prescription medication, listening to National Public Radio, visiting a national park, and mailing a letter are all, in some way, subject to bureaucratic regulation and oversight.

The bureaucracy also implements laws through spending, whether by sending monthly Social Security checks to 35 million Americans or giving grants to states. Most of this spending goes to what budget analysts refer to as “uncontrollable spending”—the portion of the federal budget that is spent on programs such as Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid. The president and Congress are usually unwilling to cut
spending for these programs, because it has historically been politically dangerous for them to do so. However, in the current economy, both policymakers and citizens are recognizing that tough choices will have to be made on how taxpayer money is spent in the coming years.