

Policy Connection



What do administrative reform policies attempt to improve?

DOMESTIC
POLICY

The Policy Challenge

As we discussed in Chapter 13, performance expectations play a central role in the work of government agencies and those who carry on the business of government. In many cases, improvements come about as a result of changes in leadership and internal management adjustments within the agencies themselves—as was the case when James Lee Witt took over as head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 1993.

At other times, however, improving the operations of government becomes a matter of public policy. This typically occurs as a byproduct of an election campaign promise made by a candidate who attempts to respond to the issues generated by the myths of incompetent and unresponsive bureaucracies. Often, this promise is little more than a vague verbal commitment to make government work better. But there are instances when the candidate articulates a particular plan or approach for improving the way government operates. As we will see in the pages that follow, the source of these administrative reform policy proposals varies, but they do follow certain general themes related to reform.

Six Major Themes of Administrative Reform

Administrative reform policy in the United States reflects the ongoing concerns about both unresponsive and incompetent bureaucracies that are central to the myths highlighted in Chapter 13. At different points in the long history of the American republic,

policymakers focused attention on some aspect of those myths that stood out for their generation. To better understand the development of administrative reform, we can focus on six major themes that have informed administrative reform efforts.

Take Politics out of Administration. One of the dominant themes in American administrative reform policy has been the need to remove politics from the business of administering government.

For example, for many of the Founders' generation, fitness to hold office was to be based not on political connections or loyalty to a particular political faction, but on one's reputation for personal integrity and social standing. Governing, they believed, was not a place for the "common man," but rather should be an "administration by gentlemen," members of a "natural aristocracy" who were expected to conduct themselves accordingly as "guardians of the republic."⁵⁶

This idea reemerged in a different form in the late 1800s as a growing number of Americans, tired of reading about corruption and scandal, concluded it was necessary to separate politics from administration. This became the goal of many Progressive reformers. "The field of administration is a field of business," argued then-professor Woodrow Wilson in 1887. For Wilson, administration "is removed from the hurry and strife of politics." Put politics aside and allow those knowledgeable in the "science of administration" to conduct the business of government.⁵⁷ This theme is the basis for civil service reforms and the idea that filling government positions should be based on merit and competence.⁵⁸

In more recent years, this theme has become associated with the idea that those who work for government should be regarded as professionals and thus be protected from partisan political interference.⁵⁹

Reduce the Democratic Deficit. The term “democratic deficit” reflects the idea that government bureaucracies are not living up to the standards and principles of democracy—standards that require that government agencies be representative, open, and responsive to the needs and concerns of the public. The phrase was originally coined by critics of the operations of European bureaucracies in the 1970s,⁶⁰ but it is appropriately applied to a major theme in U.S. administrative reform history dating back to the early years of the republic when major political figures, such as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, raised questions about the representativeness of those being appointed to government positions.

When he assumed office in 1801, Jefferson replaced many office holders to ensure that the individuals would be responsive to his democratic agenda. Although he believed in the idea of administration by gentleman, he also realized that he needed individuals who were loyal to him in key positions. When Andrew Jackson came to office in 1829, he stressed the need for “rotation in office” and filling positions with individuals drawn from different classes and regions of the nation.⁶¹ This reform theme is sustained today as the government works hard to ensure that its hiring practices are nondiscriminatory and foster diversity in the workplace.⁶²

Eliminate Waste, Fraud, and Abuse. Another historically consistent theme in American administrative reform policies is to ensure that corrupt practices are eliminated and that even the appearance of impropriety is held to a minimum. A common phrase heard in almost every campaign in American politics is the need to eliminate “waste, fraud, and abuse” from government, and implied in that slogan is the idea that the operations of public-sector agencies are subject to misuse and abuse as well as inefficiency and corruption.

U.S. history is filled with policies designed to deal with the problems that fall under this theme.

Congressional oversight and investigations are often triggered whenever there is a hint of scandal,⁶³ and auditing agencies such as the Government Accountability Office and the various inspector general offices located within each cabinet agency have been created to provide a check on operational abuses or other questionable activities.⁶⁴

Guarantee Due Process and Transparency. Another major theme addressed by administrative reform policies is the need to address the concerns of those who are subject to the actions of bureaucracies that they be treated fairly and equitably. The passage of the Administrative Procedures Act in 1946⁶⁵ was a major step in establishing basic rules that almost all federal agencies must follow in how they create and implement administrative rules and regulations. The act is central to an entire field of legal practice—administrative law—that has been developed around this theme.⁶⁶ Freedom of Information Acts are designed to give individuals access to information about the operations of the agencies they deal with.⁶⁷

Effective and Efficient Management. As American bureaucracies grew in both size and economic importance, the need for more effective and efficient management became more evident. Policies focused on improving the management of the federal bureaucracy date back to reforms pursued by presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Various presidential commissions have tackled and made recommendations for administrative reforms under almost every president since then.⁶⁸

This is most evident in reforms applied to the budgetary process, as well as the creation of the Executive Office of the President, and the central role given to the Office of Management and Budget in shaping the operations of government programs. Most of these reforms were designed to help coordinate government programs, bring about consistency in agency management, and reduce operational inefficiencies. In recent years, many of these managerial reforms have focused on improving agency performance through giving agencies greater degrees of freedom, while also holding them more accountable for achieving agency objectives.⁶⁹

Reduce and Shrink Bureaucracy. Finally, although the role and size of government bureaucracies increased through most of the twentieth century, starting in the 1970s there was an effort to reduce or even eliminate the role of government agencies in several areas.

For example, the effort to “deregulate” various sectors of the economy led to major shifts in the way some government agencies approached their job. At times, these reforms took the form of changing congressional mandates, as when Congress passed legislation in 1996 that required the Federal Communications Commission to give priority to facilitating innovation in the information and communications technology sector. At other times, government programs have increasingly relied on “proxy” administration methods such as loan guarantees that reduce direct government involvement.

In addition, steps were taken to “privatize” government functions by turning over programs to the private sector or outsourcing certain tasks to contractors.⁷⁰ For example, as of December 2015, the federal government used fourteen privately owned and operated prisons to house more than 22,000 low-security inmates at a cost of nearly \$640 million in fiscal year 2014.⁷¹

Conclusion

Each of these themes has to some degree influenced the efforts made by the federal government to change how its agencies and programs operate. Over the decades, each change in administrative reform policy has added to the complexity of how bureaucracies operate. Although each has brought about improvement in some aspect of administration, some believe that the overall impact of the various reform policies has made it increasingly difficult for federal agencies—and bureaucracies at all levels of government—to do their jobs effectively.

One obvious problem is that these themes often lead to conflicting approaches to administering

government programs. Reducing the democratic deficit, for example, will likely require subjecting bureaucrats to more, rather than less, political pressure. Reducing or shrinking government through privatization or outsourcing can make the management of government programs more difficult. Efforts to eliminate the waste associated with red tape often means lowering the high standards of due process.

These are just some of the dilemmas that emerge from the policy challenge of making bureaucracy more competent and responsive.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Some critics of administrative reform policy argue that we are making things worse by trying to fulfill all six themes. If you were asked to “prioritize” the six themes—that is, to place them in order of importance—how would you rank them?
2. Although the public’s view of the federal bureaucracy is unfavorable, many agencies have a positive reputation. For example, in general, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is widely respected, as is the National Park Service, branches of the military, and organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Other agencies, such as the Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, are rarely viewed in a positive light. What can agencies like these do to improve the public perception of what they do?
3. Think of an agency—local, state, or federal—that you have had contact with over the past year, for example, the division of motor vehicles or a law enforcement officer who stopped you for speeding. What was your view of the agency before your interaction with it? Did your interaction change your view or did it reinforce what you already believed?