

# [The bureaucracy of the united states government politics essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-bureaucracy-of-the-united-states-government-politics-essay/)

The Executive Branch of the federal government of the United States of America is charged with the task of exercising the powers of the government over its citizens as well as enforcing the laws created by the Legislative Branch, the Congress. Although overseen by one person, the President of the United States, many more people are involved in the process. The United States Congress consists of a fair number of people from the 535 elected members and their personal staff members to the support staff who work in the Capitol Building itself. The Judicial Branch as well has many members from the Supreme Court Justices to other Federal Judges in lower courts. However the Executive Branch contains the most members in its complicated and massive bureaucratic system. All organizations, administrations, and agencies, often part of what is referred to as the Federal ‘ alphabet soup’ due to the many abbreviations, that fall under this branch originate from some power granted by the somewhat vague Article II of the United States’ Constitution, or as means of exercising the powers granted to Congress in Article I.

While the federal bureaucracy demonstrated in the executive branch may appear to be massive and complicated, the goal is to bring about an understanding of its purpose in the United States government and how it plays a role in an ordinary citizen’s life. In almost every aspect of one’s life, a person must interact in some way, direct or not, with a federal agency from the Internal Revenue Service for tax payment to the Department of Labor ensuring fair payment for a person’s work, or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration which ensures a person’s safety in the workplace. By having increased understanding in the purpose and operation of such departments in the federal government, a citizen is more able to have true understanding of issues pertaining to them that have potential to influence their voting for not only the President, but also members of Congress.

The reason I have selected this topic to focus on in my research is primarily due to the fact that, outside of Presidential actions, the importance of the rest of the people in the Executive Branch is often not taught in Social Studies classes or high school political science-based classes. Students are taught that the role of the Executive branch is to enforce the laws passed by Congress, but the actual process of how such action occurs seems to be missing. In some cases in my research I was surprised when I began making connections between ideas, especially when I began to realize the sheer size of some departments. Therefore, for my own sake, I would like to look into this dark and mysterious area so as to enlighten myself and become better informed how agencies that already affect me operate and who is truly in charge.

Literature Review

## The Federal Bureaucracy

Within the Executive Branch of the United States government is an administrative center where the laws created by Congress are put into action. According to Lowi, Ginsberg, Shepsle, and Ansolabehere (2011), from an organizational standpoint, the bureaucracy is a system created by the elected politicians seeking to accomplish objectives as well as solve issues created by the nature of collective action (p. 272). A law cannot be put into action without supporting systems in place to ensure compliance, regulate actions of those affected, and so forth. Because of this connection, the system of executive agencies exists in a unique balance between two branches of government, Executive and Legislative. Carpenter (2005) notes that, while these agencies operate under the President of the United States, departments including, but not limited to, defense, education and agriculture are truly operated by Congressional action and mandate. Because of this the true nature of this bureaucracy is shaped, perhaps, not by the Chief Executive, but rather by the Legislature.

The clear path for analyzing such as system as is found in the federal government is to begin with its creation. For the United States this is to look at the men who created its Constitution and through their work shaped the future of the nation. Looking at the document itself reveals little information to assist in an understanding of the idea. Article II of the US Constitution states that the executive power is given to the President, and further reading only elaborates a minor amount to state that he is also the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, but only two minor clauses give any indication to the actual powers granted to this position. The first indicates that the President may require the heads of executive departments to give their opinion to him, such as advice, related to their duties for their department (U. S. Const. art. II, §2, cl. 1). The second establishes the president’s power to appoint people to positions such as ambassadors, Judges and others with the consent of Congress (Ibid., cl. 2). These two clauses alone shed little light on the powers given to the President and how the bureaucracy was created.

As previously noted, the other aspect of the federal bureaucratic system lies in its role of executing the laws created by Congress. Article I of the Constitution enumerates many specific powers given to Congress which, while they are able to create legislation to regulate such areas, the actual execution or regulation occurs through agencies and departments of the executive branch. Therefore it can be taken that the task of such groups, as well as the President as Chief Executive, does not need to be as clearly stated due to the already clarified powers of Congress. However, this seems not to be the truth behind the significant lack of information presented in the Constitution about a piece of the government that now, in hindsight at least, is the most relevant to the everyday citizen. Perhaps at the time of writing the document they were unaware of the significance of such a branch, or, as Irons (2006) argues they simply wished to not focus on such an issue. Instead they preferred to focus even more on the Legislature they were creating and would focus on the presidency at a later date (pp. 37-40).

## Departments of the Executive Branch

In the early years of the United States, the departments falling under control of the executive branch were few in number, yet significantly large for the time. In fact, these departments began under the idea of committees of areas including correspondence, claims, and war to avoid creating departments too similar to colonial bureaucracy experienced under British rule. These committees are the equivalent to the modern-day State Department, Department of the Treasury, and Department of Defense, respectively (Carpenter, 2005, p. 45). However, this was quickly dropped in favor of the disliked, yet highly effective executive agencies seen in Britain and France at the time. These few departments, however, were significant in their size as Carpenter explains. He notes that in the early 1800s, the US Post Office Department employed over 8, 000 employees, larger than many private companies at the time. This does not even consider the size of the military departments especially in a time where the United States continued to face many conflicts, including the War of 1812 (Ibid., p. 42).

Andrew Jackson’s presidency is significant in the expansion of executive departments and is viewed by some to be the creator of the American bureaucracy. Crenson (1975) argues this point citing Jackson’s significant reorganizations of several departments during his administration in the 1830s. Major changes occurred in the Post Office and General Land Office, as well as multiple, lesser changes in both the War and State Departments. Additionally he targeted the Treasury Department and Navy Department but was denied these changes by Congress (p. 3). The idea of reorganizing a department is important in the creation of a bureaucracy because it takes vague ideas of operational standards, stripping them from the people performing them, and redefines them as abstract functions (Crenson, 4). These functions are no longer related to a specific person, but rather a role within the institution that must be filled and put into action. The department loses personal ideas in favor of uniform and efficient operation, an effect that may be positive or negative given an individual department’s situation.

The influence of presidents on the bureaucracy they control has been mostly maintained throughout its history through the spoils system. This system is the collective idea that once a person is elected to a position of power, they will give those they like or those from whom they want support positions of importance within the government, namely as a departmental head within the bureaucratic system. Andrew Jackson is one of the presidents known best historically for major change in the positions of the bureaucracy. Crenson notes that in a significant number of departments Jackson took people important from his campaign and past endeavors giving them grand supervisorial positions within the executive branch.

Research Statement

The bureaucracy of the executive branch of the United States government is an incredibly important structure to the operation of the federal government and the nation collectively. Every person, on a regular basis, must interact in some form with one or more of the departments, agencies, or corporations within the executive branch. Because the structure is so massive and complex with structured employee and supervisor roles it can be complicated to fully understand how it operates and its impact on the lives of citizens. As such, further study must be completed for a person not otherwise familiar with the organizational structure and politics of such a system for complete understanding to be attained.

Based in the information already presented, it is clear that there is a unique history to the system of bureaucracy that exists within the United States government. This is especially true in the influence both the President and Congress have on the operation and scope of the departments. How, therefore, do the department and cabinet members of the executive branch function in regard to decisions by the President of the United States? Additionally, as demonstrated by Andrew Jackson, the president has an important role in the selection of important members of bureaucratic agencies. How, in this case, do presidents, namely Presidents Jackson and George W. Bush, shape the operations of these departments on an institutional level as well as personally with department heads and cabinet members?

The questions above are significant to a discussion of the American bureaucracy because the role of the president as chief executive of the branch is of significant importance to the operation of the agencies falling under his power. Additionally, because each president is given the authority to appoint persons of his choosing to significant positions within the agencies, it is clear that this would give him power to control the agencies in manners in line with his political party’s ideology. Full comprehension of this matter is important to understanding the overall operation of the agencies within.

Research Findings

## Departments and the President

The function of bureaucrats within the executive branch is determined largely by Congress through bills passed by them; however, the President holds an important role in shaping the manner in which agencies operate within the scope of such Congressional statutes. Shane notes that since the 1960s the President of the United States has changes roles from being an overseer of the executive branch to one who makes decisions for the agencies. Congress, in passing bills which shape the role of the executive branch, tends to be somewhat non-specific in its language, often to please both parties and allow such a bill to pass. As a result, the directives to the executive agency may leave room for Presidential policy to be implemented (2009, p. 147). That is to say that the method by which a Congressional statute is carried out can be dependent on the political views of the President. The President can make such decisions in multiple ways, from creating administrative rules and suggesting policies to the departments within the executive branch to his selection of administrators for these departments, to be analyzed more fully in the following section. The President’s control of the bureaucracy is described as a principal-agent problem. (Lowi, et al., 2011) The idea in this situation is that the bureaucratic agencies must satisfy the desires of both Congress and the President, lest Congress pass more specific legislation or perhaps decrease their budget and scope of authority or the President seek to change the organization’s structure to suit their desires. Therefore the agency will wish to respect the President’s desire for bureaucratic drift for the sake of the continuation of their position. Bureaucratic drift, as used by Lowi, et al., is the difference between the original legislation’s intentions and the final outcome as implemented in the executive branch.

President Franklin Roosevelt is a good example of the direction the White House as a collective, that is to say more than the President and to include his advisors and other staff members, provides to its agencies. He created in 1937 the Committee on Administrative Management which was an official way in which a group of experts, along with the President, could monitor bureaucratic action and enforce Presidential decisions in the agencies (Lowi, et al., 2011). President George W. Bush also made clear his views of the power of the President to have the authority to specify how executive agencies were to operate within the confines of Congressional statutes. Shane states that during the first six years of the G. W. Bush administration, that is 2001-2007, he objected 363 times when signing bills noting that Congress may be stepping on his executive power to direct agencies with their bill (2009, p. 155). Such a direct statement makes clear that many people believe the President to have significant power in the operational procedures for the agencies within the Executive Branch. Shane notes, however, that while the President does have significant policy setting power within the executive branch, agencies are not required to follow such requests as they are not hard and written law, but rather have the power of suggestion. The recourse a president could take against agencies not following such Presidential policy is to modify the organization’s leadership structure as will be seen in the next section. However, just as an agency not following the President’s desires can find themselves in a tough situation, the reverse is also true. A president who publicly declares displeasure with an agency and an attempt to change the way it operates often finds himself in a less than ideal situation in which he appears to be in the wrong. Shane (2009) notes that the desire for appearing to be a strong and powerful president often stops such drastic backlash against the department from happening for the sake of public image. Even so, the President still maintains a significant role in determining the execution of Congressional statutes in the operational policies of executive bureaucracy.

## Administrators and the President

The President has significant power to determine policy within the executive branch’s bureaucracy in two ways. The first, dictating policy to the agencies, has been analyzed previously and now the focus can be shifted to the second power of the President, nomination of departmental administrators. Although Congress must approve all appointments the President makes, unless a significant problem exists with a nomination it will generally be supported by Congress. Lowi, et al. (2011) speaks about the many controls a President has on the operation of the bureaucracy, and the importance of before-the-fact controls. They suggest that the most powerful control of this sort a President can have is that of the appointment process. There are many reasons that this power is so significant to a president. First, the appointment process allows a president to select administrators for the departments that, ideally, share his political view and are on good terms with him so that when he makes an executive decision over the agencies he can expect the decision to be carried out as he wished. Secondly, this process, by selecting trustworthy individuals, allows a president to be comfortable knowing that they do not need to constantly be a watchdog for the agencies because they can trust the administrators who are running such agencies. Andrew Jackson was, according to Crenson (1975), the first president to truly utilize the power of the appointment to its fullest. In addition to the previously mentioned bureaucratic reorganizations he implemented with the help of Congress, he also appointed many administrative positions, carefully selecting people to create a more personal bureaucracy for him to work with. Amos Kendall was a prime example of Jackson’s ability to handle administrative appointments well. He was appointed a chief clerk and in his work created strict bureaucratic policies for those he oversaw, exactly as Jackson wanted to happen. A quality appointment leads not only to a bureaucracy that operates as a President wishes, but also to one that recognizes his power as Chief Executive (Crenson, 1975, p. 75).

To see the opposite scenario in which a poor appointment of someone not in line with presidential opinion, as well as poor handling of bureaucratic operation, one can analyze the appointment and work of Christine Todd Whitman by President George W. Bush. Whitman was selected to be the head of the Environmental Protection Agency shortly after Bush won the 2000 election. Flanders argues that her appointment was motivated by a desire to balance Bush’s planned appointments, as Whitman was often described as a quite left Republican, or a liberal conservative. Again we see here the impact of public view, and Congressional opinion, of bureaucratic operation and how the President must step carefully through such decisions. Whitman served less than two and one-half years as the head of the EPA for several reasons. The media often wrote about her clashes with President Bush over policy for the EPA, as well as Bush’s White House staff members and his own suggestions as to the dissemination of information to the public about pollution and environmental safety. Of particular note was the EPA’s role after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in their analysis of the safety in New York City. Although denied by Whitman afterward, there is distinct evidence, according to Flanders that the White House put pressure on her to release false information, as well as the White House also altering press releases on the topic of air quality. Almost immediately after the attacks Whitman declared the air safe to breathe and said there was no concern for people to return to work. President Bush wanted Americans to continue on in their lives and keep the nation, especially its economic center, moving forward. Many scientists within the EPA warned that the asbestos levels alone were of significant concern, but their opinions were drowned out.

The example of Christine Todd Whitman is important because it demonstrates what can happen when a president and those he appoints do not get along in terms of policy views. A good choice for department head can turn bad when such policy is central to an administration, and when an administrator resigns as a result, public image is not positive for the President. Stepping back from specific examples, it is clear that the President of the United States has a significant impact on the operation of the federal bureaucracy. From appointments to setting policy guidelines, even within Congressional statutes, the executive power is quite massive. Congress provides the bureaucratic agencies with the mandate of what they are to do, but the President sets the tone for how such action is to be accomplished. The relationship between President and the departments of the executive branch is historically very significant to the operation of the nation as a whole.