Center for American Progress

Correcting Myths About Federal Pay

Conservatives Compare Apples to Oranges

SOURCE: AP/Matt Rourke

As the federal workforce becomes better educated and more skilled than the private sector, it's natural that average wages would go up. Aside from the U.S. Postal Service, the largest occupation categories in the federal workforce include people who oversee compliance of health and safety regulations, computer specialists who work on complex software systems, and nurses, all of whom require advanced training and specialized expertise.

By **Lauren Smith** | October 25, 2010

More than half of Americans mistakenly believe that federal workers are overpaid, and a third also wrongly think they are underqualified, according to a recent Washington Post poll. The truth is federal workers earn 22 percent less than their counterparts in the private sector, according to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

The public's misperception of federal employees as overfed bureaucrats underscores the recent success of conservative commentators at perpetuating false stereotypes about public servants, co-opting even USA Today, America's second-largest newspaper, which recently published a misleading analysis of public and private sector pay levels. These myths fuel antigovernment resentment and buttress right-wing talking points on this topic on the campaign trail.

One of many cases in point: House Minority leader John Boehner (R-OH) says that taxpayers are subsidizing "fattened salaries and pensions of federal bureaucrats who are out there right now making it harder to create private sector jobs." In fact, the federal workforce today as a proportion of the total U.S. workforce is about half what it was in 1970. This downsizing has come as the government's responsibilities have increased in size and complexity.

Yes, it's true—according to unadjusted numbers from the Bureau of Economic Analysis—that the average government salary was $123,049 in 2009, and that the private sector

The facts about the federal workforce

■ Federal   ■ Private