



Studies 'prove' feds are either overpaid or underpaid

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By Mike Causey

What would happen if you put six intelligent men and women in a pitch black room with a large elephant, a rhino, a moose and a giant squid, and they were given only 30 seconds to come up with a complete description of whatever they discovered?

Chances are, those who survived groping an elephant or rhino would have widely differing descriptions. Their reports might be accurate, up to a point. They would be based on what part of the animals (or their human colleagues) they touched during the brief expedition. Depending on where they went, the elephant could be described as snake-like, a tree or a very rough barrel. The moose could be a giant hat rack. And so on.

That, in more scientific terms, is what the Government Accountability Office says about the various studies, reports and rants about whether federal workers are overpaid or underpaid compared to their counterparts in the private sector.

Conservative think tanks looked at pay and said, in effect, that any way you hack it feds have it made. That they are better paid while working, and are among the nation's senior elite because of their indexed-to-inflation pensions — as opposed to most American workers who have no pensions to be indexed.

Pro-government groups point out that the federal workforce is highly professional — as in, it doesn't do retail — so higher group pay rates, at all but the top levels, are misleading. Workers at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission or at NASA's Goddard office probably make a lot more than the collective crew at your nearest Wal-Mart.

A popular-with-the-press study by the conservative Cato Institute showed that feds earned as much as 58 percent more (in pay and benefits) than private sector workers. The Presidents Pay Agents — an advisory group whose advice is rarely taken — says civil servants are underpaid an average of 28 percent compared to nonfeds doing the same jobs. The Congressional Budget Office, with a just-the-facts-ma'am reputation, puts feds ahead by a mere 2 percent.

So the GAO studied the studies. Its [in-a-nutshell conclusion is](#): "The numerous formulas utilized in human capital and job-to-job comparisons often lead to very different results."

On yesterday's [Your Turn](#) radio show, economist **Jacque Simon**, from the American Federation of Government Employees union, said the studies showing feds as fatcats are flawed because, among other things, they don't take into account the fact that women in the private sector are often paid less than men doing the same jobs. To hear the rest of her interview, [click here](#).

Check out the GAO study for yourself. Balanced as it is, chances are the debate is not over and that both sides will proceed, full steam ahead, trying to prove the other guy is wrong.