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Should Federal Bureaucrats Be Term-Limited?

By Lewis Morris

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They exert ever-increasing control over our lives, and they're unaccountable to anyone.

The byzantine nature and unchecked power of the federal bureaucracy has been fodder for jokes for decades. But it's not funny anymore. Anthony Fauci's pending retirement as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the [golden parachute](#) he received for essentially wrecking the country during the pandemic, is a case study in the damage done by our runaway bureaucracy.

The federal workforce numbers approximately two million, many of whom work for executive branch agencies and departments. The White House is responsible for appointing only a few thousand of these employees; the remaining 99% are hired by the agencies themselves.

Perhaps the most frustrating feature of the federal workforce is its ability to insulate itself from accountability or independent review. Poor performers can be removed only after a formal hearing process that's so biased and secretive that most cases never even reach this stage. That's why people who have no business holding these jobs are able to stay in their roles indefinitely. Ultimately, it's easier to leave them be rather than challenge the rigged status quo.

If you listen to the agencies themselves, there's nothing to worry about because there are no poor performers anywhere within them. Routine performance evaluations give 99.5% of the federal workforce at least a "fully satisfactory" rating. Are we to believe, then, that only five employees in every thousand are unworthy of their jobs? Looking objectively at how the federal government executes its assigned and assumed duties on a regular basis, a reasonable person would conclude that Uncle Sam sets the bar for these people way too low.

The primary result of institutionalizing what are essentially lifetime appointments to the federal bureaucracy is that a permanent shadow government has emerged. Bureaucrats at several federal agencies now do the work that the Constitution assigned to elected officials in the executive and legislative branches. Think about that: It's the bureaucrats who are setting the agenda for the country. They write the regulations and the laws, and they thereby promote a particular ideological agenda that's out of step with most Americans.

Here we should note that Congress bears plenty of responsibility for the growth in size and power of the federal bureaucracy. That's because the legislative body has abdicated much of its authority to that same bureaucracy. Why? So its members don't have to risk making tough decisions that could affect their reelection bids.

One solution for taming the bureaucracy and making it more accountable is to [introduce term limits for federal employees](#). A 10-year limit, or a timeframe of similar length, on the term of federal

employment could help break the stranglehold that bureaucrats have on the levers of power in Washington. A greater number of people would be eligible for federal employment due to a large number of job openings appearing on a regular basis. The hope — if not the belief — is that this would bring about a cross-section of federal workers who are more ideologically, geographically, and culturally diverse and who live and operate more closely to those they govern. Rather than having federal employees clustered in Washington, DC, and other major metropolitan areas, workers could conceivably come from anywhere, particularly in a time when remote work is so prevalent.

Term limits would also reduce the opportunity for bureaucrats to draw salaries and benefits that are significantly out of balance with the private sector. A [Cato Institute study](#) found that federal employees currently make 47% more on average than state and local workers and 80% more than private sector workers. Clearly, this isn't what our Founders had in mind for public servants.

Rather than empower a workforce that's unaccountable to the governed, the government has an opportunity to introduce some accountability. Term limits might well be the first best step in that direction.