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The \$100,000 question: How much pay is too much for a federal employee?

By Alyssa Rosenberg arosenberg@govexec.com March 5, 2010

As federal employee pay becomes a hot-button political issue, employee groups and analysts say focusing solely on salary figures ignores issues like the federal classification system and the importance of the work civil servants do.

In recent days, Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, requested that a number of federal agencies report to him on how many of their employees make \$100,000 or more, and whether those numbers have increased in recent years. And *USA Today*, using Bureau of Labor Statistics data, [reported on Friday](#) that for 216 jobs for which there was both public and private sector pay data, 180 of those positions had higher average salaries in the federal government.

But observers said those numbers and calculations did not take into account many factors that determine federal pay.

Matt Biggs, legislative director of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, called Barton's \$100,000 threshold "arbitrary," adding, "that number is more about grabbing press headlines and not so much based on rhyme or reason."

John Palguta, vice president for policy at the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service, said the \$100,000 figure "sounds like a lot of money to folks who are making less than that," but noted that in a workforce of 2.1 million civilian federal employees, the number of employees with salaries at that level is small.

And Palguta emphasized it was important to consider the role that the classification system plays in determining federal salaries. He said while public discussions of pay might make it appear that federal managers simply are handing out high salaries, they do not have a say in employees' pay. Managers only determine where in the General Schedule system employees' job duties and experience place them. Salary assignments are automatic based on classification.

Longevity plays a role as well, said Darryl Perkinson, president of the Federal Managers Association. Employees who have served their entire careers in government might have higher salaries, but also could be nearing retirement, at which point they will be replaced by workers at much lower pay rates.

And Palguta said it was important to consider whether the people whose salaries were being examined were actually doing comparable work. If federal workers' duties are more complicated, then they might deserve higher salaries, he said.

"Are we looking at divorce lawyers versus lawyers negotiating international treaties with huge ramifications?" he said. "I'm a taxpayer too. I don't want to throw money away. But I also don't want to be penny-wise and pound-foolish."

Lawyers were in one of the positions in which *USA Today* said federal workers earned lower salaries than their private sector counterparts. Federal lawyers made an average salary of \$123,660, while private

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sector attorneys made \$3,103 more annually, earning an average of \$126,763.

Chris Edwards, a CATO Institute scholar who has long argued that federal salaries are too high and has called for a salary freeze, said it was time to clarify federal pay data and statistics.

"To get to the bottom of the 'pay gap' mystery, Congress should hire an independent human resources consulting firm to dig into the official methodology and propose a more accurate way to compare federal and private worker compensation," Edwards said in a statement.

Perkinson said lawmakers should consider whether they want to hold up \$100,000 as a limit for what federal employees make, given their own salaries and those paid to their staffs. According to quarterly data from [LegiStorm](#), a congressional salary-tracking Web site, Barton's chief of staff and deputy chief of staff each are paid more than \$120,000 a year.

"With a Congress that has an 18 percent approval rating, should they be paid \$100,000?" Perkinson said. "I think the civil service is maybe not the best-loved area, but we're a little more respected than the Congress."

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When you have ALL private industry companies handling out million(S) of dollars in bonuses and everyone seems to have a mansion on the hill or at least a 5+ bedroom, 5+ bathroom, double/triple car garage, there is NO room to talk about Federal Employees. The Federal Employees who do the work. I agree with DG, the ones who worked their way up to 83,000 a yr. after 28 yrs. of service. These young (under 30 yr. olds) think they can just start working and make what everyone else makes and they are lazy and don't pull their weight. When they don't get their way, they make a scene and write bogus, non-factual articles to stir the pot. I work hard, I earn my Govt. salary and I don't abuse the Govt. time or pay system. I am not the exception. Federal employees should stop reading these article of opinion and FIGHT when "they" try to cut or freeze your pay. btw, Unelect the Elected.
mkh-I Posted March 8, 2010 9:53 AM

It is interesting that just a few years ago the Federal Government was bemoaning it's inability to hire talented qualified workers. Now that the Financial system has all but crippled the world's economy, it time to cut Federal pay. Has the level of work changed? Are Federal agencies to start acting like a Mom and Pop shop as it deals with global logistic requirements and support for a totally unique responsibility - front line defense of our nation? Maybe a Federal Employee who conducts business not as a person of equal in a democratic nation, but as an aristocrat who is not subject to the system they impose on their wards should go back to school and learn the difference between a for profit endeavor and a service to country.
Chet Dailey Posted March 8, 2010 9:48 AM

I work in civil service electronics and have to say that I am happy with my pay but at the same time I see that the same people I work with that make the same pay (well under 100k) that in no way deserve the pay they get. There a people working with me in electronics that have no idea what a potentionometer is and how to adjust it correctly. Hell if I were to mention a fullwave rectifier to them they would think I'm talking chinese. These people continue to promote over me and suck up about 50k-60k a year. Makes me scratch my head on a daily basis.....
David Slocum Posted March 8, 2010 9:45 AM

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