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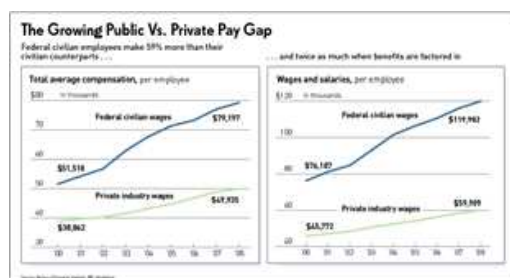
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OPINION

Not Too Bad For Government Work

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Compensation: Americans are fulminating at Washington in historic terms this summer, but here's something to anger them further: With joblessness near 10%, federal salaries are rising faster than the private sector.

Angry constituents at town halls are already armed with a quiver full of gripes. Watch out if the town hell hordes hear about another pricey government injustice: the growing pay advantage of federal employees over private workers.

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute, touched quite a nerve earlier this week when he relayed the latest wage data, categorized by industry, from the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis. "The new data show that average federal compensation is now more than double the average in the private sector," Edwards noted.

He added: "In 2008, the average wage for 1.9 million federal civilian workers was \$79,197, which compared to an average \$49,935 for the nation's 108 million private sector workers. The federal advantage is even more pronounced when worker benefits are included. In 2008, federal worker compensation averaged a remarkable \$119,982, which was more than double the private sector average of \$59,909."

Those whose livelihoods depend on taxpayers immediately got their backs up. The Federal Times, for instance, accused Edwards of comparing "FAA air traffic controllers to Wal-Mart cashiers."

In a follow-up posting, Edwards answered those who charge he doesn't appreciate the need for an elite, highly educated federal work force: "That is the reason why I focused on the pay trend over the last eight years" in which "the federal worker compensation advantage rose from 66% in 2000 to 100% in 2008."

And he asked and answered the obvious question: "Has the composition of the federal work force really changed that much in just eight years to justify such a big relative gain? I doubt it."

The Cato expert also pointed to federal careerist bureaucrats' infamous job security. "The voluntary quit rate in the federal government is just one-third or less the quit rate in the private sector," he noted. Federal employees "know that the overall package of wages, benefits and extreme job security is very hard to match in the competitive private market and so they stay put."

As to the best and brightest working for Uncle Sam who deserve what they make, Edwards countered: "For the overall economy, federal hiring of top caliber workers is a problem because it draws talent away from high-valued activities in the private sector."

He added: "In France, most of the best minds move from the elite schools into the national government, and the economy is weaker for it. In the United States, most of the best minds are attracted to places such as Silicon Valley, not Washington, and we prosper because of it."

With ordinary Americans enduring the worst economy in decades, watching government elites live high on the hog can only turn up the heat that politicians feel from those they claim to serve.

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