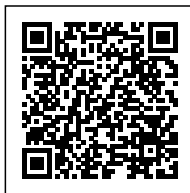


# OPINION: THE RISE OF BUREAUCRACY

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In summarizing the problem of self-government, James Madison wrote, "...the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

It's that last bit that has proven difficult. Our system of governmental checks and balances started failing in the early 20th century, and this has led to the rise of a massive federal bureaucracy.

With almost [two million](#) civilian employees, the federal government is the largest employer in the U.S. For perspective, that's over 25 percent more people than Walmart employs. As the federal government has become larger and more complex, it has become more difficult for Congress to do its job. Long gone are the days when Congress could debate the particulars of any bill. Formulating rules now requires bureaucrats specializing in finance, economics, statistics, and numerous fields of science. Congress has delegated the power of rule-making to unelected bureaucrats in innumerable agencies, commissions, administrations, and programs.

Politicians, meanwhile, use these myriad programs to win elections. Faced with a problem that stirs voters, be it real or imagined, politicians propose new programs to solve the problem. We thus have programs to address food insecurity, healthcare, children's health, housing, financial assistance, education, unemployment...the list goes on and on. And when problems don't present themselves, politicians invent them by exaggerating and grandstanding. We thus have proposals involving rifles, wealth, wages, immigration, and all manner of problems whose realities pale in comparison to politicians' characterizations.

Meanwhile, the programs that arise seem less designed to solve problems than to micromanage people into behaviors that benefit favored constituencies. Consider the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as "food stamps." SNAP benefits can be used to buy food, but not vitamins, cleaning supplies, or hygiene items. To be [eligible](#), a person must be working at least 30 hours per week or, if not working, caring for a child under age 6. Or, the person must be unable to work due to a physical or mental limitation, or participating in an alcohol or drug treatment program, or a full-time student (but not a college student). Otherwise, the person must register for work, and participate in employment training, and take a suitable job if offered.

This is just an introduction to the micromanagement involved in *qualifying* for SNAP. There are additional rules for receiving SNAP, different rules for adults without dependents, and still other rules for people older than 49 or younger than 18. Just figuring out who is and is not eligible is a full-time job.

Bureaucrats at the U.S. Department of Agriculture set these byzantine rules. Except the USDA was not created to help the poor. The USDA was created to help farmers, which explains why SNAP benefits can't be used for vitamins, cleaning supplies, or hygiene items. SNAP's primary focus ends up being not on the needs of the poor, but on the needs of favored constituencies.

And the bureaucracy itself has become a constituency, which explains the micromanagement. Micromanagement requires armies of bureaucrats to create rules, determine eligibility, monitor compliance, and dispense benefits. The politician's job has become one of using social problems to generate election wins. The bureaucrat's job has become one of using citizens who depend on social programs to create and maintain bureaucrats' jobs. Politicians and bureaucrats know that they won't be judged on what they achieve because failure can always be blamed on the other party or insufficient funding.

Voters with more goodwill than attention reward politicians whose intentions sound most noble. Politicians, unable to solve complex problems, hand the problems over to bureaucrats. Bureaucrats, unaccountable to voters, craft solutions that call for more bureaucracy. And our problems are never solved because no one in the system is rewarded for solving them.

As long as the federal bureaucracy remains largely unchecked, expect it to continue to grow unabated. Expect to see rules become more numerous and complex. And expect to see no one in Washington take responsibility for a federal government that has been out of control for the better part of a century.