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Covering Government News

Oversight of Government

By

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As I think back over decades of covering news as a journalist, I realize how many stories included local, state, and federal government departments and agencies. I developed a rolodex filled with the names and contact information of government employees. Those people were often great sources for news stories, and I met many of them at crime scenes (e.g. FBI, DEA, ATF, etc). I also spent many years covering NASA, and so I knew many employees in both NASA and their contractors.

If you've spent any time covering news, you probably can relate to the importance of knowing government employees and how various departments and agencies work. Long before there was an Internet, government employees gave journalists printed copies about the history of their agency, rules of operation, contact information, etc.

Whether you've covered news for two years, twenty years, or fifty years, you'll want to gain a good understanding of how governments work — and that includes how Congress oversees what they do. There is much debate about the issue of oversight and cutting department and agency budgets to lower the overall Federal budget. I hope you find this information helpful as you cover budgetary stories locally and nationally.

Federal Departments

The United States Federal Government has 15 official departments —

The Federal Government is broken down into fifteen departments, each of which consists of a number of sub-departments and organizational groups tasked with accomplishing the Department's overall goals.

List of Federal Departments

Federal Agencies

The ‘sub-departments and organizational groups’ include a long list of agencies — estimated by some to be more than 400 (A-Z index of U.S. government departments and agencies).

As of 2023 there are 438 federal agencies in the United States government. These agencies have developed and maintain websites open for the service and education of the public. University of Tulsa Mabee Legal Information Center

As you might imagine it takes a lot of people to run that many governmental departments and agencies:

As of November 2024, the federal government employed just over 3 million people. The number of federal employees has topped 3 million since September 2024. The last time the government could claim that many employees was in September 1994.

Federal employment numbers peaked at 3.4 million in 1990 and the most recent low was in 2014, with 2.7 million.

Federal government employees work at departments or agencies housed under one of the three branches of government — executive, legislative, or judicial, though most federal agencies are under the federal

executive branch. Across all US industries, it's the 15th-largest workforce overall. [USA Facts](#)

Agency Oversight

Overseeing such a large number of departments, agencies, and employees takes much work. Here's a short history of how our government began.

Though many Americans think of the United States becoming a country on July 4, 1776, the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783 was when the United States was officially recognized as a sovereign nation.

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 proposed a new constitution establishing a much stronger national government. Although this controversial new Constitution provoked a great deal of resistance, it was eventually ratified by the necessary number of states, replacing the Articles of Confederation as the framework of the United States government. [Library of Congress](#)

The U.S. Constitution was finally ratified by all 13 states on May 29, 1790.

George Washington was elected the first President of the United States and served from April 30, 1789 to March 3, 1797. Washington had four members of his Cabinet in his first administration:

1. Secretary of State - Thomas Jefferson
2. Secretary of Treasury - Alexander Hamilton
3. Secretary of War - Henry Knox
4. Attorney General - Edmund Randolph

John Adams served as Washington's Vice President. Adams did not attend cabinet meetings and was quoted as saying that his role as vice president was, "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived." (MountVernon.org)

The constitutional reference utilized to serve as justification for the creation of the cabinet reads that the President: “may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices.” Cabinet Members

President Washington, his Cabinet, and members of the U.S. Congress (less than a total of 100 members from both the Senate and House) were busy during the early years of the new nation with a total workforce of only a few thousand employees.

Growth of Government

I wondered how the U.S. Government grew from a small number of departments with a few thousand employees in 1789 to the much larger number of departments and agencies with millions of employees that we have now —.

In November 2024, the federal government employed just over 3 million people, or 1.87% of the entire civilian workforce, according to BLS data. That figure doesn't count the roughly 1.3 million active-duty military personnel, who aren't typically considered "employees." It does include the more than 600,000 people who work for the U.S. Postal Service, an independent federal agency with semiautonomous status that operates somewhat like a private business.

Set aside the Postal Service and you have a bit more than 2.4 million federal workers. That makes the federal government the nation's single largest employer, with even more workers than Walmart, Amazon or McDonald's. In fact, the Postal Service by itself would, if it were a private business, rank among the 10 largest private-sector employers, ahead of industry rivals UPS and FedEx. [Pew Research](#)

You may also find [Congress.gov](#) and the [National Archives](#) helpful in your research.

Departments:

- Department of State — 1789
- Department of Treasury — 1789
- Department of Interior — 1849
- Department of Agriculture — 1862
- Department of Justice - 1870
- Department of Commerce - 1903
- Department of Labor — 1913
- Department of Defense — 1947
- Department of Health and Human Services — 1953
- Department of Housing and Urban Development — 1965
- Department of Transportation — 1966
- Department of Energy — 1977
- Department of Education — 1980
- Department of Veterans Affairs — 1989
- Department of Homeland Security — 2002

The U.S. Congress started what is known as ‘Standing Committees’ in the late 1700s. The House of Representatives has its standing committees, while the U.S. Senate has its standing committees. The members of each standing committee include elected officials and unelected staff members who assist them in their work. A ‘standing committee’ oversees government agencies within its jurisdiction. Committee members also review bills and make recommendations for the full House or Senate to consider.

Here are several examples of ‘active’ standing committees that began in the 18th and 19th centuries. You can find a full list of ‘active’ and ‘terminated’ committees at [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov). You’ll also find lists of ‘joint committees,’ ‘commissions,’ ‘caucuses,’ ‘panels,’ and ‘task forces’ at that same website.

House Standing Committees:

- Committee on Rules — 1789
- Committee on Ways and Means — 1789
- Committee on Commerce and Manufactures — 1795
- Committee on Public Lands — 1805
- Committee on the Judiciary — 1813

- Committee on Commerce — 1819
- Committee on Agriculture — 1820
- Committee on Foreign Affairs — 1822
- Committee on Appropriations — 1865
- Committee on Banking and Currency — 1865
- Committee on Education and Labor — 1867
- Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce — 1892

Senate Standing Committees:

- Committee on Finance — 1816
- Committee on Foreign Relations — 1816
- Committee on the Judiciary — 1816
- Committee on Public Lands — 1816
- Committee on Agriculture — 1825
- Committee on Appropriations — 1867
- Committee on Education — 1869
- Committee on Education and Labor — 1870
- Committee on Agriculture and Forestry — 1884

Congressional ‘committees’ also oversee the work of government agencies. These agencies include hundreds or even thousands of employees who work at the discretion of the director and managers of each agency. Just like elected officials, government employees are paid with taxpayer dollars. Keep in mind that the Federal Government currently has hundreds of agencies operated by hundreds of thousands of government employees. Here are several examples of active agencies (in alphabetical order):

Government Agencies

- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)
- Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
- Census Bureau
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
- Central Intelligence Agency
- Council on Environmental Quality
- Drug Enforcement Administration
- Elder Justice Initiative

- Fannie Mae
- Federal Bureau of Investigation
- Federal Bureau of Prisons
- Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
- Legal Services Corporation
- Marshals Service
- Marine Mammal Commission
- Migratory Bird Conservation Commission
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)
- National Weather Service
- The Bureau of Engraving and Printing
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
- U.S. Commission of Fine Arts
- United States Commission on Civil Rights
- United States Institute of Peace
- Voice of America

Some people speak of Federal departments and agencies as a ‘permanent bureaucracy’ because employees are not elected and may work there until retirement. The number of people who have retired from the Federal government is in the millions. You may find [this website](#) helpful in seeing the total of retirements from just 2000 - 2023. Employees who retire from the Federal Government receive retirement benefits similar to those in the private sector. The difference is that retirement funds for Federal employees are paid with a combination of taxpayer dollars, along with smaller employee contributions.

If you are a journalist who covers local or state news, you may find this online information helpful since it divides [Federal civilian employment into states and territories](#).



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee