

The Federal Bureaucracy

The federal bureaucracy is comprised of the federal government agencies and institutions that implement and administer federal laws and programs.

It is often referred to as the “fourth branch of government.”



Federal Bureaucrats

Federal **bureaucrats** are career **government employees** who work in Cabinet-level departments and various independent agencies.

90% of federal workers are selected through the **civil service system**. The other 10% are **presidential appointees** (Cabinet secretaries), independent regulatory **commissioners** (independent of president), and low-level assistants (**patronage** positions).



Decentralization

To increase efficiency and accessibility, the federal bureaucracy is divided into ten regions in order to decentralize programs and services.

Texas is part of **Region VI**, which also includes Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. The Region VI office is located in Dallas.

Most of the policy implementation by federal agencies takes place at the regional level.

The types of federal agencies include:

- 1) Cabinet departments
- 2) independent executive agencies
- 3) independent regulatory commissions
- 4) government corporations

Cabinet Departments

The 15 **Cabinet departments** are major administrative units that have responsibility for conducting broad areas of government operations. Cabinet departments make up 60% of the federal workforce.

In 1789, George Washington's Cabinet included secretaries of the three executive departments that had existed under the Articles of Confederation: Foreign Affairs (**State**), War (**Defense**), and **Treasury**. To provide the president with legal advice, Congress created the office of attorney general (**Justice**).

The **president appoints** the Cabinet secretaries, but the **Senate** has to approve them. The president alone can **remove** any of the Cabinet secretaries from office. The Cabinet secretaries have three masters: the president, the Congress, and the people.

Independent Executive Agencies

Independent executive agencies are similar to Cabinet departments, but they have narrower areas of responsibility and often **perform services** rather than regulatory functions.

Like Cabinet secretaries, the heads of independent executive agencies serve at the pleasure of the president and can be **removed** from their position.

Independent executive agencies could logically be part of an executive department, but are **separate** for practical or symbolic reasons. Example: NASA is independent rather than part of the Department of Defense because the space program is not solely dedicated to military purposes.

The Environmental Protection Agency was created in 1970 to administer federal programs aimed at controlling pollution and protecting the nation's environment. Some independent executive agency directors, like that of the EPA, are given **informal Cabinet-level status**.

Independent Regulatory Commissions

In 1887, Congress created the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to regulate railroad companies. The ICC was the first independent regulatory commission.

Congress creates an **independent regulatory commission** to regulate a particular aspect of the economy.

Members of the commission are **appointed** by the president and hold their jobs for fixed terms, but once they are appointed they have **independence** from the president and cannot be removed for partisan reasons.

Regulatory commissions are created to develop expertise and provide **continuity of policy** with respect to **economic issues**. Examples: the Federal Reserve Board, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

Government Corporations

Government corporations are the most recent addition to the federal bureaucracy.

Beginning in the 1930s, Congress created specific corporations to perform certain functions that private business could perform.

The government will typically form a corporation when the financial incentives for private businesses to provide the services are minimal. Example: the **Tennessee Valley Authority** provides electricity to rural areas where private business failed to expand.

Sometimes government corporations offer services at a lower cost than private businesses would.

Another example is the passenger-train corporation **Amtrak** that provides transportation in the Northeast.

Bureaucratic Authority

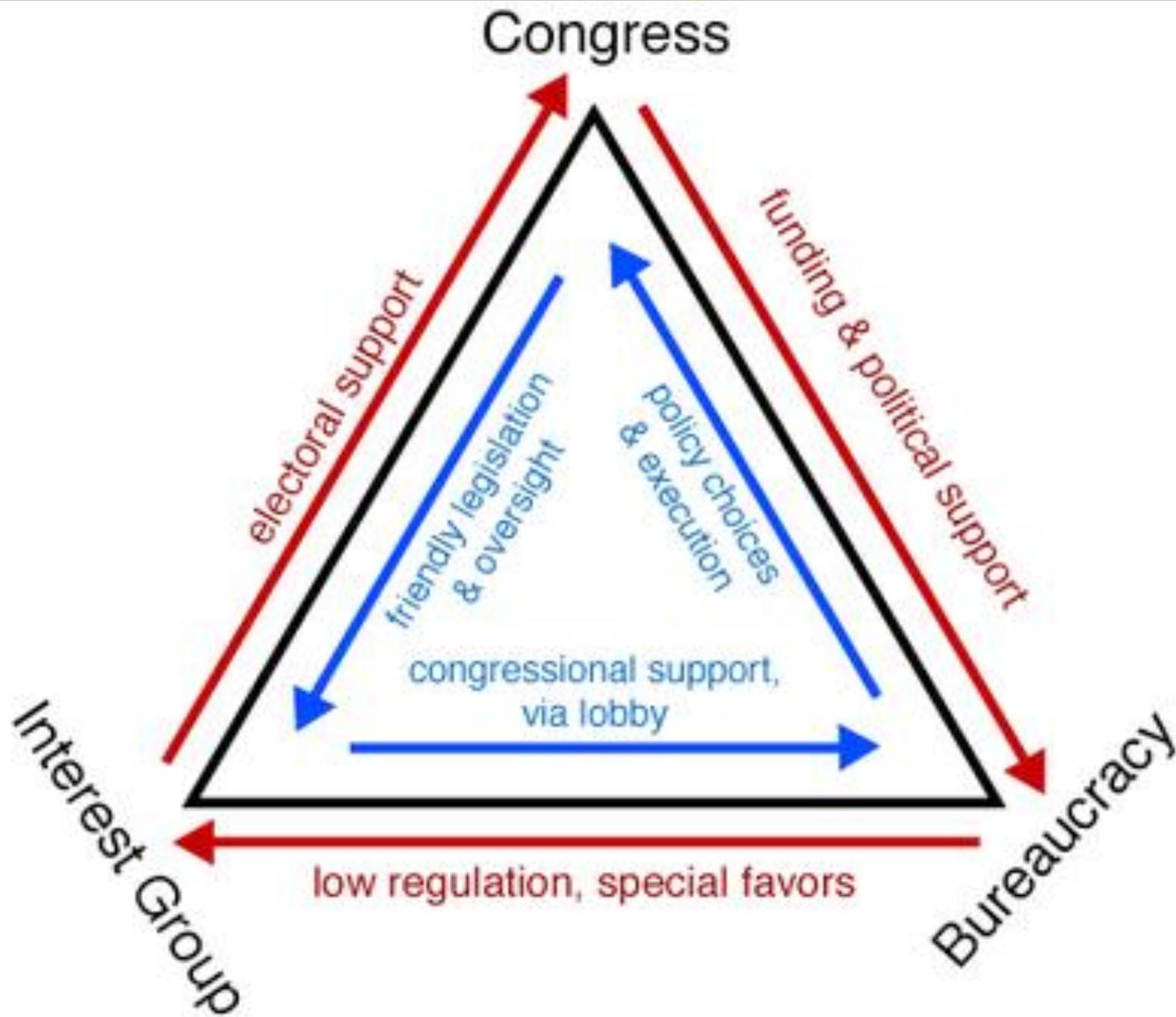
When Congress creates any kind of department, agency, or commission, it is actually delegating some of its powers listed in Article I, Section 8, of the U.S. Constitution.

Congress does not have the time, expertise, or ability to involve itself in every detail of every program.

How federal agencies execute congressional policies is called **implementation**, the process by which a law or policy is put into operation.

Close relationships can form between the congressional committee that has oversight, the executive agency or commission, and interest groups.

These **iron triangles** can become **sub-governments** that monopolize policymaking authority on specific issues.



Iron Triangles and Issue Networks

Iron triangles are made up of three elements: 1) federal agency, 2) congressional committee, 3) interest group

The elements of the iron triangle become **mutually dependent** on each other and prevent policy changes that they disagree with or that would decrease their power.

Rigid and unchanging iron triangles have morphed into what political scientists now call **issue networks**, which are more fluid and may be maintained for ideological reasons rather than mere financial benefit.

An issue network may have a diverse array of participants who disagree with each other, but play indispensable roles within the policymaking process nonetheless.



Bureaucratic Authority

The federal bureaucracy is tasked with interpreting and applying (or not applying) various policies.

Administrative discretion is the ability of bureaucrats to make choices concerning the best way to implement congressional or executive intentions.

Bureaucrats exercise administrative discretion through **rule making** and **administrative adjudication**.

Rule making is a “**legislative**” process that results in **regulations** that have the force of law.

Administrative adjudication is a “**judicial**” process in which an agency settles **disputes** between two parties over regulations.

Checks and Balances

The president can **appoint** and **remove** specific secretaries and agency heads, while Congress can **confirm** or **reject** presidential appointments.

Constitutionally, Congress can also **create** or **abolish** departments and agencies.

Congress can hold **oversight** hearings to investigate the actions of the federal bureaucracy.

Congress also authorizes **funding** and makes appropriations.

To help oversee the bureaucracy's financial affairs, Congress created the **Government Accountability Office (GAO)**. The GAO tracks how money is spent, how policies are implemented, and notifies Congress if it uncovers problems with an agency's work.