



The Partnership for Public Service's Vision for a Better Government

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About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that strives to build a better government and a stronger democracy.

Learn more at ourpublicservice.org.

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Introduction

We all encounter the federal government many times a day, often without even knowing it. It's the federal government that protects our food and water supply, ensures planes reach their destinations safely, responds to natural disasters and more.

The public rightfully expects that these services work effectively—after all, they are funded by taxpayer dollars. Yet none of these services would exist without skilled federal employees—dedicated Americans who serve the public interest. They carry out the policies of our elected leaders, enforce our laws, protect our rights, and promote our safety and security.

Unfortunately, proposals by former President Donald Trump and his political allies would give a president and political appointees the power to arbitrarily fire thousands of professional, nonpartisan civil servants who are afforded due process rights and replace them with individuals considered loyal to the White House.

The plans would undermine our government's ability to deliver fair and responsive services. A federal workforce filled with employees hired for their political beliefs rather than their skills and qualifications would move us further away from the type of government the public deserves. It would strip federal agencies of expertise and hamper their ability to provide good service to everyone, not just to those who support the president of the day.

Our government is not perfect, but we need to modernize it rather than burn it down. Based on more than 20 years of expertise in government reform, the Partnership for Public Service has homed in on the five most important priorities to improve how our government serves the people:



Develop better government leaders



Make it easier to hire and keep great public servants



Hold poor performers accountable



Unleash the power of data and tech to achieve better public outcomes



Provide efficient, customer-friendly services to the people

These reforms would provide our government with what it needs most: a way to offer the public simple and timely access to services like Social Security, veterans benefits and health care; modern, secure IT systems that help keep our country safe and secure; and highly qualified federal leaders and employees who are committed to the public trust and are good stewards of taxpayer dollars. As a result, the improvements we propose should be the basis for any discussion about enhancing our government’s ability to better serve the public—a goal supported by political leaders on both sides of the aisle, even in this era of increased polarization.

These priorities also are critical to [solving the crisis of public trust in government](#). Today, too many people believe our government is wasteful, lacking in transparency and accountability, and indifferent to public needs. Changing public perceptions of government requires constructive solutions and a dedication to changing the status quo so government works—for all of us, regardless of political beliefs.

A nonpartisan federal workforce and well-managed agencies are fundamental to this vision. Hiring federal employees for political loyalty over merit and competence is not. Congress and the president must prioritize this reform agenda to support the federal workforce and promote practical ways to improve our government’s performance and accountability. Only then will our government keep up with the pressing challenges facing our nation and regain the public’s trust.

THE CIVIL SERVICE

The federal government currently employs more than 2 million people (often called the civil service) who deliver a wide range of essential services to the public. These professionals play a crucial role in protecting our national security, promoting public health, driving economic development and providing government services nationwide. Federal workers are [hired based on skills and qualifications](#), with a requirement that they be strictly nonpartisan while performing their jobs. They serve under the direction of individuals appointed by the president and carry out the priorities of the president. Political appointees and Congress set policy and issue directives, and the professional career workforce implements them, regardless of their own political views. The civil service is a fundamental part of a well-functioning government.





1. Make sure the people in charge of government agencies are capable, responsive and committed to the public good.

Placing competent people in leadership roles at federal departments and agencies is the most critical factor for our government’s success and impact. Individuals appointed by a president, and federal employees who have risen through the ranks to positions of authority, hold great responsibility. They must develop innovative solutions to complex problems, motivate their workforce and hold their teams accountable for delivering critical services to the public. At a time of declining faith in American institutions, these leaders—including the president and members of Congress—can rebuild trust in government by meeting the public’s needs effectively. However, our government is facing a leadership crisis.

PROBLEMS

No unified standard for public service leadership

Unlike organizations within the private sector and the military, the executive branch does not have a systematic, deliberate approach to developing and supporting leaders. Many senior government officials have been moved into top positions for their expertise on a particular issue but lack fundamental knowledge on how to manage an organization. Yet they may have tens of thousands of employees in their chain of command.

Too many political appointees require Senate confirmation

Between the November election and Inauguration Day, incoming presidents must prepare to fill over 4,000 political appointments. More than 1,300 of these positions require Senate confirmation—

an increase of more than 60% since 1960—making it difficult for a new president to get a full team in place quickly.

Outdated strategies for identifying and hiring senior executives

Members of the Senior Executive Service, which is composed of the highest level of nonpolitical professional employees, work alongside political appointees who are hired for their political beliefs or loyalty to a particular president. Yet the government has not updated methods for hiring and recruiting these top people in decades. Nor has there been improvement in ongoing skills development for SES members. These issues often discourage current federal employees, as well as top people from outside government, from applying for these positions.

DATA

- According to data from the Partnership’s Center for Presidential Transition®, it takes an average of **more than 180 days** for the Senate to approve a political appointee—more than three times as long as it did under President Ronald Reagan.
- Due to the increased time spent on nominations and confirmations, votes on legislation made up more than 90% of all recorded votes in the Senate under President George H.W. Bush, **but only about 40% of all recorded votes** in the Senate under Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden.
- According to the 2023 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings, which measure the morale and opinions of the federal workforce, federal employees’ rated their senior leaders at **just 57.3 out of 100**, revealing significant dissatisfaction with individuals in senior leadership position.
- According to data provided by Mercer, a human resources consulting firm, 77% of private sector respondents would recommend their organization as a good place to work, **while only 67.5%** of federal employees would do so.
- People of color represent **nearly 49% of all full-time, entry-level** federal employees, but only **about 26% of all members** of the Senior Executive Service.

SOLUTIONS



Modernize leadership requirements

All federal executives and managers, including political appointees, need to meet a standard for leadership that holds them accountable for running healthy and high-performing agencies. The government should adopt a framework, **similar to the one developed by the Partnership for Public Service**, that requires leaders to prioritize and demonstrate skills essential to effective federal service, including the foundational value of being a steward of the public good.



Reduce the number of appointees subject to Senate confirmation and streamline the confirmation process

The number of positions subject to confirmation is simply more than the Senate can handle. The Senate also needs to fix the arduous and lengthy confirmation process to make it easier for agencies to fill critical leadership vacancies, while still preserving its role in reviewing nominees' qualifications. Congress also should update the Federal Vacancies Reform Act to clarify who may serve temporarily in a position until a political appointee steps into a role.



Improve the hiring process for senior executives

The criteria used to vet potential senior career leaders has not been updated in more than 20 years, while the skills needed to lead in a complex, digital world have changed drastically. Government needs to alter the way it recruits, identifies and hires people to be federal leaders, including ensuring they have a diversity of experience within the public, private or nonprofit sectors. Additionally, agencies need to spend time developing employees earlier in their careers to help them gain skills to move up the leadership ranks in their agencies.



2. Make it easier to hire and keep great public servants

The backbone of our federal government is the more than 2 million career employees who work across the country to serve the public. Hired based on their qualifications and skills, they design, develop and deliver services that connect agencies with the people they serve and ensure our government fulfills its mission to make our country safer, healthier and more prosperous.

However, the federal government struggles to recruit, hire and retain this talent, hamstringing agencies' ability to meet public needs.

PROBLEMS

Slow hiring process

It takes the government an average of roughly 101 days to hire someone—more than twice the time it takes in the private sector. This keeps applicants in limbo, increasing the likelihood they will accept other job offers, and leaves agencies with key talent gaps.

Lack of opportunities for young people

Agencies tend not to prioritize internships and also overlook entry-level talent as a long-term strategy, despite some reports of progress in the most recent [President's Management Agenda](#). Today, just 7.5% of the full-time federal workforce is younger than 30 and 42% of federal workers are older than 50, compared with 20% and 33% in the broader labor market, respectively.

Ineffective hiring assessments

Agencies initially assess applicants based on how they rank their own skills and abilities. As a result, job candidates must portray themselves as experts at everything—even when they are not—to advance in the application process. This setup requires human resources managers, who move strong applications to the next hiring stage, to spend extra time sifting through potentially unqualified applicants, slowing the time it takes to hire an employee and giving hiring managers lists of unqualified candidates to consider.

DATA

- [Nearly 68% of Americans ages 18-34](#) have never considered applying for a job in the federal government.
- Since 2001, human capital management has been on the [Government Accountability Office's High Risk List](#), which highlights the federal programs and areas of work most in need of improvement.
- According to a national survey conducted by the Partnership, **93% of Americans** believe an applicant's relevant skills should be “extremely” or “very important” when they are being considered for a federal job.
- Of the federal hiring managers who did not select a candidate to fill a given position from October 2023-March 2024, [nearly half](#) said they were dissatisfied with the finalists on their list, or believed candidates' resumes either lacked specialized experience or overstated the applicant's actual skill set.

SOLUTIONS



Make hiring a top priority for agencies and their leaders

People are the most important part of an organization—and this should be reflected in strategic planning efforts and agency performance evaluations. Leaders should make fixing the broken hiring process a top priority and agencies should evaluate current hiring processes to discover where they are not working for applicants, hiring managers and human resources specialists.



Prioritize recruiting early-career talent

Agency leaders, human resources offices and managers should view student interns and applicants early in their careers as a key to hiring and developing employees. Congress also should create a new hiring mechanism that permits high-performing interns from qualified third-party internship providers, the external organizations that place students in federal internships, to be easily converted to full-time government employees, a practice that is currently prohibited.



Implement skills-first hiring

Agencies should evaluate applicants using skills assessments, including those developed by experts in given subject areas. Minimum job qualifications should be based on the skills needed for the job. Moreover, agencies should be allowed to share their best-qualified job candidates with one another. This practice would enable more hiring managers at a wider spread of agencies to consider those candidates for roles in government.



3. Hold poor performers accountable

When a company's services or products do not work well or an employee does something wrong in the workplace, people generally expect the problem to be dealt with quickly. These same expectations hold true for our federal government—and the bar is even higher because the public has a vested interest in ensuring its tax dollars are put to good use.

Yet the current process for addressing poor performers in government is difficult for managers and confusing for workers, leading to a lack of accountability for government employees who do not carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively. It is important to ensure that federal employees cannot be fired for politically motivated or unjust reasons, but there are ways to update and simplify the current system that would make it easier to remove poor performers.

PROBLEMS

Reluctance to deal with poor performers

More than 40% of respondents to the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, the annual nationwide survey of federal employees, reported that poor performers usually remain in their work unit and continue to underperform.

No evaluation of employees during their first year of employment

The probationary period for new employees is meant to assess whether someone is a good fit for the job. It's typically one year long and is designed to be the final assessment in the hiring

process. However, supervisors often do not use this period to ensure new employees have the skills they need to thrive in their new role.

The appeals process takes too long

Federal employees can generally appeal a suspension, demotion or removal, but the process is complicated. In fiscal year 2023, it took agencies an average of 102 days to process an employee's initial appeal, according to the Merit Systems Protection Board that adjudicates some employment cases.

DATA

- **91% of Americans** believe having competent civil servants is important for having a strong American democracy.
- **Only about 10% of respondents** to the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey reported that poor performers are usually removed or transferred from their work unit.
- **Over one-quarter of Americans** view holding performers more accountable for their performance as one of the top two actions our government could take to become more effective and trustworthy.

SOLUTIONS



Hold managers accountable for employees' performance

Managers should be familiar with how to fairly address performance issues and be trained and provided with support on using disciplinary and removal procedures.



More effectively use probationary periods to evaluate employees

Supervisors should be required to determine whether employees are qualified, unqualified or the right fit during their first year on the job. If an employee is not performing well, agencies should have a process to provide them with additional training, move them to a different position or terminate them before the probationary period ends. New hires should not be automatically advanced to full-time employment if their supervisor does not formally decide whether they are qualified or unqualified. Rather, supervisors should have to evaluate these new employees and conclude that they meet the expectations of the job to move them to full-time status.



Streamline the disciplinary process

If an employee is disciplined or terminated for poor performance or misconduct, there needs to be a quick and streamlined review and appeals system, one that provides due process protections and ensures decisions are not politically motivated.



4. Make better use of AI, technology and data to achieve better outcomes for the public

To meet public expectations of the digital era, agencies need to upgrade old IT systems so they can use emerging technology, including artificial intelligence, to make sense of customer data, analyze how government is performing, and deliver accessible and efficient services that meet the needs of a diverse public.

While the government has made progress in recent years toward modernizing its services, it still lacks the technology and tech experts to keep up with a fast-paced world.

PROBLEMS

Outdated technology

According to the 2023 Government Accountability Office's High Risk List, the government spends 80% of its annual \$100 billion IT budget on operating and maintaining existing IT investments, including old and outdated systems, not on new investments in leading-edge technologies.

Inadequate use of data to improve government services

Agencies collect a lot of data, but it often goes unused to improve federal programs and is housed in systems that cannot communicate with each other, hampering data sharing and data analytics. Data on how the federal government is performing is not widely accessible for agency leaders, members of Congress and the public. This lack of transparency limits agency efforts to improve federal services and drives public distrust of government more broadly.

The federal government is behind on emerging tech

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing how the world works, but government systems are outdated and unprepared to use this evolving technology. This technology also comes with significant concerns over privacy, bias and misuse. Agencies lack the guidelines and processes needed to mitigate these concerns before implementing and scaling AI.

DATA

- **Less than 5%** of full-time federal IT employees are younger than 30, **while nearly 52%** are over 50.
- On average, satisfaction with online government services lags behind satisfaction with online services in the private sector **by almost 20%**.
- **Just 15% of Americans** believe the federal government is transparent.
- Agencies have **yet to implement nearly 300 recommendations** from the GAO High Risk List in the area of IT acquisitions and operations, including enhancing IT workforce planning practices and developing plans for modernizing or replacing outdated systems.

SOLUTIONS



Invest in modern IT systems

Congress must work with federal agencies to implement a long-term funding strategy to modernize badly outdated technology systems and strategically plan for future technological needs. Federal agencies and Congress should also collaborate to develop uniform rules around the responsible use of AI and other emerging technologies.



Commit to quality data

Top-performing organizations use data to improve results. For federal agencies and Congress to do so, they need high-quality data that can be processed by new AI tools and machine-readable formats. That data must then be used to make informed policy decisions.



Use and scale AI responsibly

AI is a rapidly evolving technology, so it's important that government use it thoughtfully. To do that, Congress and agencies must first develop guidelines for use that are fair and transparent. Agencies also need to train and hire experts in this field to ensure AI tools are safe and meet their intended goals.



5. Build modern, customer-friendly services

Providing the public with a good customer experience means making sure our government has the best technology, websites and systems available to easily determine what each customer needs and to inform the public how and where to go for help. While the government has pockets of excellence, it falls short of what the public expects and deserves. Negative interactions with federal agencies that do not meet customer needs can be a major obstacle to rebuilding trust in government.

PROBLEMS

Not an organizational priority

Agency efforts to provide a first-rate customer experience—if efforts are being made at all—are often disjointed, underfunded and disconnected from the organization’s strategy. Too often, these efforts do not fall under the explicit purview of a senior leader or senior leaders. This lack of strong institutional support for creating a better customer experience means agencies often fail to deliver high-quality services to the public.

Lack of expertise

The broken federal hiring process has deprived our government of the talent it needs to keep pace with customer experience requirements and technological advances, particularly when compared to the private sector.

Lack of customer feedback

Government services work best when they are designed with the customer in mind. This is best done by testing products and services with the public and gathering feedback to inform changes. But

legislative barriers make it difficult for agencies to get valuable user feedback. They typically are required by law to go through a specific, often convoluted, approval process.

DATA

- **Only 23% of Americans** believe the federal government’s services are easy to navigate.
- **Only 35% of Americans** agree the federal government serves their community.
- **Only 21% of Americans** agree the federal government listens to the public.
- According to a national survey conducted by the Partnership, **only 28% of Americans** agree that the federal government treats people fairly, regardless of race, class, gender, level of ability or any other demographic characteristic.
- The federal government **ranked last** among 10 major economic sectors in the 2023 American Customer Satisfaction Index, the only national measurement of consumers’ experiences across industries, with a score of 68.2.

SOLUTIONS



Put the customer first

Agency staffs, from the highest levels of leadership to nonpolitical career employees, should be held accountable for providing a first-rate customer experience. Agencies should identify senior officials to lead customer experience work, fund and staff customer experience teams, and encourage the adoption of best practices across the organization.



Tackle recruitment challenges

It is critical for agencies to recruit and hire qualified individuals with skills in customer experience, data and technology to significantly improve service delivery.



Improve data sharing and collection

Congress should consider legislation and agencies should develop processes for government to more easily collect, exchange and use customer data to deliver better public services. Using this data to improve the customer experience while protecting people’s privacy requires agencies to develop secure and flexible data-sharing systems.



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