



From Political Appointee to Civil Servant: What Is ‘Burrowing In’?

Q: What is “burrowing in”?

A: Under all recent presidents, some political appointees have attempted to become career civil servants—a process commonly called “burrowing in.”

Unlike political appointments, civil service positions do not terminate at the end of an administration. Conversion therefore allows political appointees to stay in government after the president who appointed them has left office.

These kinds of conversions create concerns. Supporters of an incoming president may be suspicious of individuals hired by the previous administration. More broadly, some fear conversions violate the [merit system principles](#) that govern hiring in the federal civil service.

The hiring process for civil servants is designed to promote a professional, apolitical workforce and to prevent discrimination, political favoritism, nepotism or other prohibited practices. To enforce these rules, the Office of Personnel Management reviews requests to move a political appointee into the civil service. This review is designed to prevent improper conversions while providing talented individuals with the opportunity to join the civil service.

Q: How does OPM conduct oversight over burrowing?

A: While OPM has reviewed conversions since the Carter administration, the process has changed over time. Currently, agencies must submit a request to OPM whenever they seek to hire a current political appointee or one who has served in a political position within the last five years. OPM conducts multilevel reviews of each application to make sure the conversion follows federal hiring guidelines. It also issued a [May 2024 memorandum](#) reminding agency and department heads of the review process. The memorandum includes a “do’s and don’ts” list for agencies to consider when hiring a political appointee for a career position.

If OPM believes a conversion violates federal hiring laws or regulations, it may reject the conversion. If OPM finds the agency’s conversion attempt violates the federal government’s [prohibited personnel practices](#), it may refer the issue to the Office of Special Counsel for investigation.

On occasion, agencies have converted political appointees without OPM review. In those cases, OPM retroactively reviews the conversions and issues any necessary corrective actions, which may include readvertising the position. For example, in 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal



Circuit [upheld the firing of an appointee](#) who had converted to a career position without an OPM review.

Q: What is Congress' role?

A: Congress also created specific reporting requirements for conversions. The [Edward “Ted” Kaufman and Michael Leavitt Presidential Transitions Improvements Act of 2015](#) requires OPM to submit an annual report to Congress that details the conversions. During the final year of a presidential term, these reports must be submitted quarterly. Also, it is common for the key congressional committees with oversight of the federal workforce (the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs) to request monthly updates on burrowing near the end of a presidential term. This added level of congressional oversight further guards against improper burrowing.

Q: How common is burrowing?

A: Hiring a political appointee into a career position is rare. In 2023, the [Government Accountability Office](#) examined 187 conversion requests made between March 2016 and January 2021—a period spanning the end of the Obama administration through the end of the Trump administration. OPM approved 129 of the requests; 32 were denied and another 26 were withdrawn by the agency or returned by OPM for not being subject to review. For context, the federal government hired more than 200,000 new employees in fiscal year 2023.

Nevertheless, even a handful of improper instances of burrowing can raise suspicions about agencies' fidelity to merit system principles. Additionally, GAO has identified dozens of burrowing cases that did not initially go through review, highlighting the importance of OPM vigorously enforcing its review process and the ongoing need for strong congressional oversight.