

DEMOCRACY
FORWARD 

THE PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO THE **CIVIL SERVICE**





Why the Civil Service *Matters*

The federal civil service — more than two million dedicated, nonpartisan employees — is a critical foundation of our democracy. These career professionals live and work in every U.S. state, ensuring that the federal government functions effectively and fairly for the American people.

Civil servants keep our food and medicine safe, maintain our transportation systems, protect clean water, secure public safety and protect national security, deliver our mail, support schools and hospitals, ensure small businesses can access credit, safeguard the financial system, and serve in our courthouses, airports, and on our public lands.

But today, the civil service is under unprecedented attack. The Trump-Vance administration is working aggressively to dismantle the merit-based federal workforce through mass firings and an intentional plan to traumatize federal workers to make them quit. It is also engaged in efforts to politicize hiring. These moves threaten not just the people who serve in government, but the stability and fairness of government itself.

This People's Guide, one of several produced by Democracy Forward to help make government accessible to all, explains what the civil service is, how it came to be, what's at stake now, and how we can all play a role in defending a professional, nonpartisan government that works for everyone.



Understanding the Civil Service

A Brief History

Before the 1880s, the federal workforce was governed by the “[spoils system](#),” in which jobs were awarded to political allies of the president rather than to merit-based, qualified professionals. This system led to corruption, inefficiency, and poor delivery of public services.

In 1883, Congress passed the [Pendleton Act](#), requiring competitive exams and merit-based hiring for federal positions. Over time, Congress has voted bipartisanly to [strengthen protections](#) through the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, veterans’ preference laws, and whistleblower protections. This professionalized system was designed to ensure that government expertise and continuity outlast partisan politics.

What Is the Civil Service?

The civil service is a professional, merit-based workforce that keeps the federal government operating regardless of who holds political power. At the end of the Biden-Harris administration, federal workers made up just 1.5% of the total American workforce — the same share as in 2000. Yet their impact touches nearly every aspect of daily life.

FAST FACTS

- Nearly **30%** of federal workers are [veterans](#) (compared to 5% of the total U.S. workforce).
- Over **20%** of federal workers identify as [having a disability](#) (versus 5% nationwide).
- **32%** of the federal workforce holds a bachelor’s degree and **22%** have an advanced degree — higher rates than the overall U.S. labor force.
- Federal workers earn, on average, **24.7% less** than their private-sector counterparts.
- There are more **nurses (111,000)** and **IT specialists (101,000)** in the federal government than any other profession.

Where Are Federal Workers?

Federal employees work far beyond Washington, D.C. — in fact, over [80%](#) live outside the National Capital Region. There are federal workers in [every congressional district and in every U.S. state, and 41 states have at least 10,000 federal employees](#). From rural hospitals to Social Security offices to agricultural inspectors to national park rangers, civil servants are part of local communities across the country.

“When dedicated civil servants like myself and my colleagues are abruptly terminated due to budget cuts and political decisions, it doesn’t just impact us—it impacts the people we serve. Cutting federal jobs does not create efficiency—it creates bottlenecks, delays, and failures in the very systems that Americans rely on.”

Raphael, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

Today's Threats to the Civil Service

The Trump-Vance administration is attempting to politicize, weaken, and dismantle the career civil service at an alarming scale. This effort was previewed in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a manifesto that candidate Donald Trump distanced himself from, only to embrace as president. The Trump-Vance administration's current Director of the Office of Personnel Management has threatened that some [300,000 federal jobs](#) will be cut by the end of 2025. This includes [154,000](#) federal workers who were rolled off the books on September 30, 2025, with a combined two million years of service, following the administration's effort to compensate people to leave the civil service under threat of eventual dismissal via layoffs (called Reductions-in-Force or RIFs).

The Trump-Vance administration's strategy includes:

Mass Firings & Forced Resignations

- Wide-scale [lay-offs](#) across agencies and ["Fork in the Road" deferred resignation program](#) to pressure workers to leave government service, risking a significant loss of expertise and ability to provide services to the American people.
- Reviving and expanding the "Schedule F" rule from the first Trump term ([now "Schedule Policy/Career"](#)) to make it easier to fire employees who resist unlawful orders. This policy allows the Trump-Vance administration to reclassify tens of thousands of career federal workers into positions that can be terminated or replaced at will, stripping them of long-standing civil service protections.

Changing Hiring Rules to Favor Partisan Loyalists

- Requiring applicants for most jobs to answer [politically-based essay questions](#) about advancing the president's policies and executive orders.
- Launching a new ["Schedule G"](#) hiring authority to bypass the merit-based competitive processes. This policy removes many of the protections afforded to career civil service employees, effectively increasing the number of political appointees.
- Turning [Chief Human Capital Officer roles over to political appointees](#) and requiring [political appointees to sign off](#) on hiring of civil servants and stacking hiring boards with political allies. This makes it easier for a new administration to install loyalists, elevating the risks of politicization and instability.



"The National School Lunch Program is the nation's second-largest food and nutrition assistance program (...) Reduced staffing at the regional office means assistance to states will slow and may go unanswered."
C., U.S. Department of Agriculture

Harming Workers Who Remain in the Federal Workforce

- [Eliminating telework](#) and [transferring positions and offices](#) to remote locations to drive workers out.
- Removing [key responsibilities from career staff](#).
- [Undermining due process](#) for workers facing termination.
- Eliminating or weakening federal employee [unions' ability to represent workers](#).

These moves threaten to return the U.S. to a spoils system, where loyalty to the president, not competence, determines who delivers essential services to the public.

I How These Attacks Harm the American People

Dismantling the federal workforce doesn't just hurt civil servants — it hurts everyone. Following the Trump-Vance administration's policy shifts, we are seeing:

- **[Social Security Delays](#):** AARP reports longer wait times, overwhelmed field offices, and system crashes.
- **[Weakened Food Safety](#):** Farmers warn that U.S. Department of Agriculture staff cuts are leaving crops and livestock vulnerable to disease.
- **[Harm to Veterans' Care](#):** Cuts at the Department of Veterans Affairs have disrupted research, reduced support staff, and jeopardized patient care.
- **[Tax Collection Impaired](#):** The Internal Revenue Service has lost 11% of its workforce — including 31% of auditors — reducing its ability to collect revenue and enforce tax fairness.
- **[Public Health Risks](#):** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is losing the ability to focus enforcement efforts, like declining to help investigate lead poisoning in Milwaukee schools due to gutted resources.
- **[Local Economic Shocks](#):** Communities across the country feel the loss when thousands of skilled federal jobs disappear.

“My role at the Federal Transit Authority was related to Federal grants for improving transit (...) The workload (...) has not been reduced with the firing of probationary employees and (...) Reduction in Force of Federal employees. It will not be efficient, and (...) transit improvements will be delayed, impacting people's ability to get to work, education, medical appointments, and other life essential trips.”

C., U.S. Department of Transportation



How Democracy Forward is Defending the Civil Service

Democracy Forward and its Civil Service Strong initiative are on the frontlines, using the courts, advocacy, and organizing to fight back and protect the federal workforce. Civil Service Strong is a collaborative effort by people, organizations, and communities across the country who are joining together to support our civil servants. Alongside the 95% of people who believe civil servants should be hired and promoted based on their merit rather than their political beliefs, we are committed to supporting a career, non-partisan civil service and the people who power it.

In the Courts

Since Inauguration, Democracy Forward has served as a critical bulwark against the unconstitutional actions that we are seeing the new administration take. The organization has filed hundreds of legal actions and launched more than 150 investigations, securing multiple significant victories that directly protect Americans from harmful policies.

In towns and cities across America, Democracy Forward provides legal representation and expert counsel to people and communities who make up the very fabric of American democracy – free of charge. Those include several cases in which we are working closely with unions that represent federal workers, organizations that rely on the federal government, and impacted employees who are being unlawfully targeted (detailed docket list on behalf of federal workers available upon request):

- **Stopping Unconstitutional Government Reorganization:** Challenging mass RIFs and unauthorized agency overhauls ([AFGE et al. v. Trump](#)).
- **Protecting the U.S. Department of Education:** Challenging unlawful efforts to dismantle the agency ([Somerville Public Schools v. Trump](#)).
- **Opposing the Return of Politicized Hiring:** Challenging the “Schedule Policy/Career” proposal to make non-partisan federal employees subject to political whims ([Coalition Comment on Schedule P/C](#); [PEER v. Trump](#); [AFGE v. Trump](#)).
- **Challenging Forced Resignations:** Challenging coercive buyout schemes ([AFGE v. Ezell](#)).
- **Challenging Unlawful RIFs During the Government Shutdown:** Blocking the administration’s threatened mass firings of federal workers during the shutdown ([AFGE et al. v. Trump](#)).
- **Fighting Against the Abandonment of Worker Protections:** Formal [letter](#) and litigation ([Saladino v. OSC](#)), urging that the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) reverse its unlawful refusal to investigate complaints from terminated probationary employees and to restore its duty to protect federal workers’ rights.
- **Protecting Independent Appointments:** Challenging the removal of Senate-confirmed members of several independent agencies and commissions, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, National Transportation Safety Board, Surface Transportation Board, and African Development Foundation.

Resources & Support for Federal Workers

Civil Service Strong is leading a comprehensive response to the Trump-Vance administration's dismantling of the civil service through litigation, advocacy, storytelling, organizing, resources, data, and policy:

- **[CivilServiceStrong.org](#)**: This one-stop hub provides for legal resources and rights information for current and former federal employees.
- **[Rise-Up - Federal Worker Legal Defense Network](#)**: This network of over 1,100 volunteer attorneys offers pro bono help to impacted federal employees.
- **[Civil Service Defense & Innovation Fellowship](#)**: This program, incubated at Democracy Forward, is designed to elevate the voices and expertise of former public servants, incubate talent, build innovative reforms for the future, and bring attention to the impact of recent efforts by the Trump-Vance administration to dismantle the federal government from within.
- **Town Halls & Training**: Civil Service Strong staff have reached more than 250,000 federal workers and allies through in-person and virtual town halls, briefings, workshops, and support.

Why This Fight Matters

The career civil service exists to ensure our government functions with competence, fairness, and stability — regardless of politics. Efforts to undermine it would inject partisanship into every corner of government, from veterans' care to disaster response to tax collection.

Defending the civil service is defending our democracy itself. When experienced public servants can do their jobs without political pressure or fear of retaliation, the government works better for everyone — delivering safe food and medicine, funding schools, and safeguarding our communities.

We all have a stake in ensuring that public service remains a merit-based calling, not a political reward system.



“Without access to essential information, the public will struggle to assert their housing rights, gain first-time homebuyer education, and learn about HUD efforts to support affordable housing directly and indirectly. This could place our most vulnerable communities at greater risk of homelessness, leaving them without support.”

A., U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development