

The Expanding State and the Bureaucratic Way

By [Greg Guma](#)

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Virtually anything can be proven with statistics, but some figures send an unequivocal message. In 1977, for example, the first year of the Carter presidency in the US, the federal government took in \$356 billion and spent \$401 billion. Four years later, at the start of the Reagan era, revenues had reached \$602 billion and spending was more than \$660. In less than half a decade, the cost of government had increased by more than 50 percent.

Within the next ten years annual spending rose another 50 percent, reaching the trillion dollar level. In 2012 the US government took in \$2.4 trillion and spent more than \$3.5. Even before Carter and Reagan signals of alarm sounded about expansion of the government's size and, along with that, the power of the executive branch. During the Nixon administration, a series of abuses raised questions about whether presidential imperialism ought to be curtailed. But after the smoke of Watergate cleared, despite unauthorized bombing in Southeast Asia and a criminal conspiracy at the highest levels, the scope of presidential power continued to expand.

The size and complexity of Congress also zoomed out of control. Between 1954 and 1974 the machinery of the House and Senate expanded 15 times faster than the number of constituents. The budget for congressional operations grew from \$42 to \$328 million a year. Ten years later the cost of the legislative branch reached \$1.6 billion. In 2009 Congressional operations cost \$4.4 billion.

Enormous and confusing, Congress has become a labyrinth of bureaus, dependent on technical personnel and permanently interlocked with countless special interest groups. Each new crisis gives birth to a new committee or administrative office. As far back as 1946, the Congressional Reorganization Act attempted to anticipate the problem by limiting the number of standing committees. But that failed to stop the emergence of countless sub-committees and panels on every conceivable matter.

Like any bureaucracy, Congress reflects Parkinson's Law: work increases to fill the time and staff available to do it.

Along with the sheer scale of government, the role of elected representatives has also changed. Congressmen and women can no longer be legislative generalists, dabbling in a wide variety of issues and keeping tabs on many government agencies. Soon after taking office, they begin to train as specialists, largely using committee assignments to make their marks.

Milton Gwirtzman, a former legislative assistant, once labeled Congress "the bloated branch," concluding in his study of legislative growth that congressmen have much in common with cabinet members: neither have much more than a casual connection with most of what is done in their names.

The agreeable Senator who offers to help a constituent is not only unaware of most activities of his office, but also estranged from the general administration of government. No matter what they would like constituents to think, members of Congress simply can't do very much, since they must follow regulations that are rarely bent and rely on specialized, technical administration.

Since control of information is other hands, office-holders are often unable to make informed choices. Even innovations like the Office of Technological Assessment, which was launched in the 1970s to make data handling more efficient, actually removed the data further from the locus of decisions. Along with the babble of technical staffers has come the intensification of pressure from lobbying groups, which have grown even faster than Congress. Their influence slows down and skews the legislative process, locking interest-sensitive congressmen into inflexible positions. As a result of these developments, the decision-making of most congressmen mixes personal prejudices, standardized routines, negotiations between officials and bureaus, and persistent pressure from outside groups.

Electoral politics has meanwhile become the study and control of public opinion. Techniques developed for market research identify the volatile preferences of "registered" consumers. Surveys and polls, as well as the pundits who interpret them, manipulate opinion as well as define it. Just as Harvard Business School studies showed how psychiatric counseling could neutralize worker complaints, polls have trivialized politics, narrowing the range of "legitimate" choices.

Political parties, whose policy functions have been usurped by bureaucracies and think tanks, mainly handle the retail marketing that political staffs deem appropriate for public consumption. Walter Dean Burnham put it nicely long ago: politics has become just another item of luxury consumption.

The evolution of political bureaucracy in the US is not unique. Bureaucratic growth and rigidification has overtaken most developed nations. Take France, historically a wellspring of rationalism, and the epitome of the modern State, a complex of bureaus that not even the French can unravel. According to political philosopher Jacques Ellul, his homeland illustrates well the emergence of a new form of society, one characterized by largely impersonal rule.

Like most modern States, France has two contradictory elements – politicians with their assemblies and committees, and administrative personnel in the bureaucratic complex. Illustrating facets of Hegelian and Marxist thought, administration serves as a relay between the State and society (an Hegelian concept) and is simultaneously a means of that State (a Marxist view). Within such a bureaucratized State, however, politicians lose much of their influence. In *The Political Illusion*, Ellul explained:

"From the very moment that a general policy decision has been made by the minister, it escapes his control; the matter takes on independent life and circulates in the various services, and all depends eventually on what the bureaus decide to do with it. Possibly, orders will eventually emerge corresponding to the original decision. More frequently, nothing will emerge."

*This is an excerpt from *Prisoners of the Real*. To read other chapters, go to [Prisoners of the Real: An Odyssey](#)*

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