

CIVICS IN THE CLASSROOM

In this 4th article of the "Civics in the Classroom" series, we can now talk meaningfully about the kinds of positions in "the government" and how they are filled--since the previous articles have made it clear that:

- Our country has three levels of government--federal/national, state and local--which affects the type of work and kinds of job opportunities available.
- Each level of government is divided into three major branches--executive, legislative and judicial--providing a further breakdown of kinds of positions and ways of filling them.
- Altogether, the public--or government--employment sector is so large and varies that it makes little sense for young people to overlook it when thinking of career opportunities.

Executive Branch

The most logical place to start in analyzing the public sector world of work is to recognize that the huge majority of the millions of positions are located in the executive branches of the federal, state and local governments; and that the number at the state and local levels far exceeds that at the federal level.

If one's interest is in such fields as education, law enforcement, social work and community services, you will find that town, city, county and state departments and offices throughout the country employ a wide variety of professional, technical, administrative and clerical personnel. Most of these entry level and journeyman positions in public educational institutions, hospitals, police/fire departments, etc., are filled through appointments based on various types of qualification rating systems. The higher level positions often also take into account partisan political considerations. And of course a few jobs at the top (e.g. state governor, city mayor, county executive, etc.) are filled by public elections.

In the federal/national government, the some 2.5 million civilian jobs in the executive departments and agencies (including the U.S. Postal Service) are similarly

filled under the so-called civil service merit system based on appointment of persons meeting and rated under qualification standards. Only about 3,000 of these positions are filled by political appointees bearing such titles as department secretary, under secretary, commissioner and agency director. And only two positions--President and Vice President--are filled by election.

The occupations in the executive branch of the federal government are legion: hardly any job title exists which is not found somewhere in this vast and varied employment scene. (And one must not forget that the same is to a large extent true of the military part of the executive branch, with about 2 million uniformed personnel in a myriad of occupational fields). From physical and natural scientists, engineers, doctors and lawyers to photographers, writers, investigators and planners--all and more are working in federal departments and agencies, from entry level to senior executive level jobs, and with only some 10 per cent located in the Washington, D.C. area.

It is unfortunate that most people apparently think that most federal government civilian jobs are filled through politics or who-you-know. That certainly was true in the 19th century. But after the assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed job seeker and since 1883, when Congress passed the Civil Service (or Pendleton) Act setting up a merit appointment process based on meeting published qualification standards, these jobs were gradually shifted into this non-political category. For many decades by now, some 90 percent have thus been covered.

Also, states and many local governments have similar merit systems for various job categories, although at these two governmental levels there are still appreciable numbers of positions filled outside the merit system.

Legislative Branch

It goes without saying that when it comes to this branch in the three levels of government, the main actors (i.e. U.S. representatives and senators, state legislators, city councilmen, etc.) are elected by the

public based on political parties. The various aides and staff/committee assistants workings for the elected officials generally obtain their jobs through political appointments. However, even in this legislative setting there are often some administrative/technical positions filled on the basis of merit/qualification rating. In addition, at the federal/national level there are several quite large legislative agencies (e.g. the Library of Congress, General Accounting Office, and Congressional Budget Office) where the great majority of positions are filled in a merit system fashion.

Judicial Branch

As for this third branch, at the federal level all judges are appointed by the President (with the advice/consent of the Senate); while at the state and local levels one finds a mixture of both appointed and elected judges. But here again there are generally support/administrative positions where often the employment method is a form of merit system.

Thus as we said in the beginning of these articles, it makes no sense to speak of "government employment" in some generic sense, as though all the millions of different jobs somehow partake of a sameness. Understanding that behind the word "government" in our country lie three structural/political levels plus three substantive branches in each level--it becomes obvious that one needs to qualify and specify what exactly one is referring to when talking public sector employment.

Most people seem to think of a vast colorless bureaucracy (primarily of clerks and paper pushers) when thinking "government." That concept is very far from reality as it excludes the elected legislators, the whole judicial system, as well as all the professional/scientific/technical/managerial positions which constitute the bulk of jobs in the executive branches.

Future articles will explore historical and other reasons why in the United States there are such strong feelings and basic controversies about the subject of government and employment therein.

(Professor Lorentzen contributes a bi-monthly column)