

Federal Employees

Busting Myths with Facts About Our Nation's Workforce

The National Treasury Employees Union is setting the record straight about the culture and reputation of the more than 150,000 workers it represents within federal agencies and departments.

MYTH: Federal employees are part of the ‘swamp’ that needs to be drained.

FACTS: While it is true that a president appoints the Cabinet secretaries who lead the agencies, the president does not hire or fire the civil servants who work on the frontlines. Whichever political party controls the White House, federal employees are on the job, carrying out the missions of those agencies. The law creating a civil service system based on merit—not political affiliation—goes back 134 years¹ and is a bedrock of our democracy. Federal employees are professionals who work for the taxpayers, not the politicians. They take an oath to uphold the Constitution, not a loyalty pledge to elected officials. As for the swamp, that was a term that was used during the 2016 campaign to describe the lobbyists and special interests in Washington, but it has been inappropriately and unfairly expanded to include federal employees. They aren't swamp creatures; they are regular hard-working Americans who believe in public service, without regard to politics. A Pew Research Center poll in 2013 found that while the public's overall trust in government was especially low, 62 percent of Americans have a favorable view of federal government employees.²

MYTH: Their work doesn't benefit me.

FACTS: Is your food and medicine safe? Can you breathe the air and drink the water? Are the gates to the national parks open? Is your bank deposit protected? Are illegal drugs and criminals being stopped at the ports? Are financial scams shut down? The answers, of course, are yes. The work of federal employees is so intertwined with the daily operation of our country, it is impossible not to be a beneficiary of it. Americans should not take their work for granted, and none of us want to find out what happens to our public health, our economy and our security if those services are not provided. A recent NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll³ found 57 percent of Americans want government to do *more* to solve problems and meet their needs. That's the highest percentage since the poll question began 22 years ago, and the data shows that the shift toward a more active government has been especially significant among independents and Republicans.⁴ All taxpayers, including federal employees, want a government that runs efficiently and effectively, but that can only happen with strategic planning and smart management, not indiscriminate across-the-board budget cuts that threaten agencies' abilities to deliver such vital services to the public.

MYTH: The federal workforce is growing at an uncontrollable rate.

FACTS: The size of the federal workforce has been roughly 2 million since the 1950s. There was a spike to more than 3.3 million in 1945 because of World War II. But since 1951 the figure has fluctuated between about 1.8 million and 2.2 million, not including postal employees and active duty military.⁵ The swings are mostly attributable to the number of civilian employees in the Department of Defense, which rises in times of military conflicts and then falls during the drawdown. Last year, the Office of Personnel Management reported there were 2.047 million federal civilian employees. The Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs have the largest numbers of civilian employees.

¹ <http://legisworks.org/sal/22/stats/STATUTE-22-Pg403a.pdf>

² <http://www.people-press.org/2013/10/18/trust-in-government-nears-record-low-but-most-federal-agencies-are-viewed-favorably/>

³ <http://www.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/I7119NBCWSJAprilPollFullRelease.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/poll-record-number-americans-say-government-should-do-more-n749766>

⁵ <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/federal-employees-workforce-numbers-by-state.html>

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MYTH: Federal employees all live in Washington, D.C.

FACTS: More than 80 percent of the nation's federal employees live and work outside the Washington D.C., area.⁶ Remember the blue pages of the old phone books that listed all of the nearby local offices for federal agencies, like the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service and the National Park Service? The phone books are gone, but those employees are still there. No matter where you live in America, you have neighbors who work for the federal government. They are law enforcement officers, nuclear physicists, accountants, lawyers, bank examiners, chemists, engineers, secretaries, doctors, air traffic controllers, researchers and customer service representatives. Downsizing the federal government would have a negative economic impact that would ripple through every state.

MYTH: They get paid too much and get free benefits.

FACTS: Federal employees, on average, earn about 34 percent less than their counterparts in the private sector, according to the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁷ Federal employees, especially those with advanced degrees, can often earn at least double in the private sector but choose instead to focus on a career of public service. For example, an investigator at the Food and Drug Administration could earn a higher wage working for a big pharmaceutical company, but instead is committed to reviewing new drug products to ensure they are safe for the public. Just like health insurance provided through private employers, the cost of health insurance for federal employees is shared by the employee and the employer. The Office of Personnel Management says federal employees on average pay 30 percent of the total premium cost,⁸ which is more than the U.S. average of 21 percent for private sector employer-based programs.⁹ And just like the private sector, premiums go up every year. Federal employees hired since 1984 pay Social Security and Medicare taxes at the same rate as all private sector employees, and all federal employees are able to contribute to a 401k-like plan to help them save for retirement.

MYTH: They can't be fired or laid off.

FACTS: Federal employees are not like federal judges; they do not have jobs for life. Federal employees can be terminated because of downsizing or poor performance, just like the private sector.¹⁰ The law, written to guard against political interference, protects their right to appeal such decisions. If the agency followed the rules and the termination did not violate regulations, such as protection from discrimination, then of course a federal employee can lose his job. "Employees should be retained on the basis of the adequacy of their performance, inadequate performance should be corrected, and employees should be separated who cannot or will not improve their performance to meet required standards," according to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board's 2016 report to Congress.¹¹ NTEU proudly defends the rights of federal employees to plead their case and to ensure that our government, as an employer, treats its workers fairly and with respect.

⁶ <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/federal-employees-workforce-numbers-by-state.html>

⁷ <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/pay-systems/general-schedule/federal-salary-council/recommendation16.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.opm.gov/news/releases/2016/09/open-season-for-federal-health-benefits-dental-and-vision/>

⁹ <http://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/single-coverage/?dataView=1¤tTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

¹⁰ <https://www.mspb.org/Federal-employee-termination-procedures.html>

¹¹ A Report to the President and the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, September 2016, p. 50; <https://www.mspb.gov/mspbsearch/viewdocs.aspx?docnumber=1340293&version=1345596&application=ACROBAT>