GOVERNMENT MATTERS

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In This Issue

Explosion at Louisiana Chemical Plant is the Latest in a String of Chemical Accidents

On June 13, an explosion and fire occurred at a petrochemical plant in Geismar, LA (just south of Baton Rouge), killing one person, injuring at least 70, and forcing residents within a two-mile radius of the plant to stay indoors. The Williams Geismar olefins plant explosion was just the latest in a string of chemical accidents, highlighting the risk that hazardous chemicals can pose to workers and communities and the urgent need to shift to safer chemicals.

The Geismar Plant

The Williams Geismar olefins facility is a light-end natural gas liquid cracker, which means it breaks oil and natural gas down into various chemical subcomponents. The plant's website indicates that it produces approximately 1.3 billion pounds of ethylene and 90 million pounds of polymer-grade propylene, chemicals commonly found in petrochemical plants and that are used to make plastics.

Both ethylene and propylene are highly flammable chemicals and dangerous explosive hazards. Exposure to both chemicals can cause headaches, dizziness, drowsiness, confusion, and unconsciousness.

The cause of the fire is still undetermined, though reportedly only propylene was burning. However, the plant has had two prior accidents in recent years, according to the plant's risk management plan. In September 2012, a fire occurred at the facility when a furnace exploded. The explosion, which involved a flammable mixture of ethane and propane, caused $9 million in property damage. There were no deaths or injuries. The facility's records note that the explosion in 2012 was due to following improper procedures on the furnace.

Prior to that, in 2009, a fire occurred when sixty pounds of a flammable mixture, which also included propylene and ethylene, were released due to a mechanical failure in a cracking furnace. The accident, which occurred at night, did not result in any injuries or deaths but caused $115,000 in property damage. After both incidents, the company said it added new process controls to its equipment and revised its operating procedures.

Dangers of Flammable Chemicals

The petrochemical industry is a risky business. Since 1996, at least 125 of the 1,345 facilities containing either propylene, ethylene, ethane, propane, or butadiene in the EPA's Risk Management Plan (RMP) dataset have reported accidents.

The Dow Chemical Company's Texas Operations in Freeport, TX, alone has had 15 accidents resulting in one death, 19 injuries, and 130 people evacuated. Three accidents at the Flint Hills Resources Port Arthur Chemical plant in Texas, owned by the infamous Koch brothers, have resulted in property damage of over $306 million.

In the last 17 years, at least 27 accidents involving petrochemicals have occurred in southern Louisiana, home to a large number of the country's chemical facilities. The Williams Geismar olefins plant is one of 12 such chemical plants along a 10-mile stretch of the Mississippi River.

Last year alone, 1,270 people died in more than 30,000 chemical spills and accidents, according to government data reported in *The New York Times*. This year has seen additional high-profile accidents.

- In April, an explosion at a fertilizer plant in West, TX, killed 14 people and injured over 200.
- On May 28, a tractor trailer crashed into a freight train outside of Baltimore. The train, carrying chemicals, set off an explosion that could be heard at least a half-mile away and released a plume of smoke into the air.
- Just one day after the Geismar explosion, a nitrogen plant just 20 miles north in Donaldsonville, LA, also had an explosion that killed one and injured seven workers.

These accidents have significantly increased public concerns about the handling of dangerous chemicals, particularly at facilities in close proximity to schools, nursing homes, and residential homes.

Increasing the Public's Right to Know

Under the Clean Air Act, the EPA requires facilities producing or storing hazardous chemicals to submit a risk management plan describing the company's activities to prevent the accidental release of harmful chemicals and how its management intends to respond to accidents that do occur. These plans are supposed to help local fire, police, and emergency response personnel and inform citizens about chemical hazards in communities. But after recent chemical accidents, questions have been raised about whether companies and regulators are clearly communicating the risks associated with plants containing toxic and flammable chemicals.

Current EPA guidance, issued in 2004, contains a set of best practices for facilities to follow when providing information to the public about risks and emergency plans. The guidance recommends extensive engagement with community residents when facilities are developing or revising their risk management plans. Unfortunately, it appears that most companies fail to follow this guidance.

Increased Public Pressure for Safer Chemicals and Processes

Safer chemicals and processes are often available to companies that want substitutes for dangerous substances. The Center for Effective Government and 50 other environmental, public health and safety, and labor organizations have long advocated that companies be required to switch to safer chemicals and production processes when they are available. It can be done: the Clorox Company announced its replacement of bulk quantities of chlorine gas with safer chemicals in 2009.

An excellent *New York Times* editorial after the West, TX, explosion called on the EPA to "compel plants to switch their materials and methods by invoking the general duty clause of the Clean Air Act, which calls on them to prevent accidental release of dangerous chemicals and to minimize the consequences of such releases." It went on to note that the "explosion is a reminder that the Obama administration has failed to uphold a promise the president made as a candidate in 2008 to require the industry to switch to safer chemicals and processes wherever feasible."

When the acting administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) responded on June 13, he emphasized the need for a "renewed focus on supporting local responders, further efforts by the federal government to advance additional chemical plant safety measures, and standardizing the best practices of industry leaders."

However, he made no mention of improving communications with the public about the risks to their communities from flammable and toxic chemical plants. The residents of these local communities deserve attention, too.

DOJ Letter Shows Need for Stepped-Up Enforcement of Freedom of Information Act

A new letter by Department of Justice (DOJ) officials reveals the department is engaged in limited enforcement activities under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The letter responds to an inquiry from the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform to DOJ's Office of Information Policy (OIP), which oversees agency compliance with FOIA.

FOIA is a vital tool for government transparency and accountability, as it provides the public with information necessary to understand what government is doing. Under FOIA, anyone may request information from federal agencies on critical topics including food safety, compliance with environmental standards, and special interest influence in government decision making. Agencies must promptly provide the information unless it is covered by one of the law's specific exemptions, such as classified national security information. But the implementation of the law consistently falls short of open government advocates' expectations. Lax enforcement mechanisms are a key factor in those performance shortcomings.

Few Tools for Accountability

The DOJ letter demonstrates that the office has undertaken many activities to encourage improved agency FOIA performance, including training, guidance, consultations, and reporting requirements. By contrast, enforcement activities remain very limited. The office reports that it receives approximately 20 "compliance inquiries" from requesters each year complaining about an agency's handling of a request, but the outcomes of those inquiries are not made public. The letter does not reference any audits, investigations, or observations made by the office to assess FOIA compliance.

The law itself provides few tools to oversee effective FOIA implementation. There are three main ways FOIA can be enforced, but currently, all of them have shortcomings.

Encourage Agency Compliance

The law directs DOJ to "encourage agency compliance" with FOIA, but it provides no further detail or specific authority to the department to ensure that this happens. Based on its recent letter, DOJ is primarily fulfilling this responsibility by providing training to agency FOIA staff, issuing guidance on recommended ways to implement the law, answering questions from agency staff, and requiring agencies to report on various aspects of their FOIA implementation.

These are undoubtedly valuable activities. For instance, the Center for Effective Government praised the office's 2012 guidance instructing agencies to shed more light on their use of FOIA's law enforcement exclusions. However, these efforts are unlikely to be sufficient to turn around a recalcitrant or poorly performing agency. For example, while reporting requirements may force an agency to disclose failures, such as backlogged requests with missed deadlines, it is not clear whether the agency would face any consequences for those shortcomings or if the DOJ has any authority to require specific corrective actions.

Task Other Agencies with Compliance Duties

The law also tasks other agencies with compliance responsibilities, but these are also limited and somewhat problematic. In 2007, Congress created the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) within the National Archives and Records Administration to act as a FOIA ombudsman. The law directs OGIS to "review compliance" with FOIA, offer recommendations, and mediate complaints from requesters.

OGIS has assisted many requesters and issued useful recommendations, but as the agency reported in March, it has not yet undertaken the compliance aspects of its mission. "When OGIS facilitators serve as neutral third parties to assist in resolving FOIA disputes, it could be difficult for those same individuals to separately review an agency's practices," the office stated. "As such, OGIS's review mission would best be implemented by a separate team of OGIS staffers who do not handle complaints, but instead assess agencies' FOIA policies, procedures, and compliance. Given OGIS's small staff, it has not been able to establish such a team." Furthermore, open government advocates note that OGIS does not have the independence necessary to candidly offer its views on agency practices or seek compliance with the law.

Audit Agencies' FOIA Performance

In addition, the law directs the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct audits and issue reports on agency FOIA implementation. These reports have been informative but infrequent: GAO has published only four reports on FOIA since 2009. For instance, in 2012, GAO reported that some agencies were not taking sufficient steps to comply with the law's requirement to post frequently requested records online. The report also found that agencies used incompatible FOIA software, even within the same cabinet department, which could contribute to delays when agencies need to consult together on a request.

New Approaches at DOJ

The DOJ letter *does* detail some more ambitious compliance activities. Starting in 2011, the office has prepared its own assessment of agency progress in implementing FOIA, which it expanded in 2012. The assessment includes milestones for agency performance and rates each milestone as green, yellow, or red. As it continues to evolve, this approach could prove useful for monitoring agency compliance and performance, encouraging progress, and highlighting areas in need of improvement.

In addition, for years, DOJ has received occasional complaints from requesters about agency FOIA implementation. In 2012, the office reported that it received 19 such "compliance inquiries," a number comparable to previous years. "In response to these compliance inquiries," the office stated, "OIP discussed the issues with the agency involved and, whenever appropriate, made recommendations on the steps needed to address the concern."

These compliance inquiries could potentially be a valuable tool for the agency to build upon. However, little is currently known about how DOJ handles such inquiries, as it does not report the details of those inquiries or their outcomes.

Need for Reforms

Congress should assign DOJ more specific responsibility and authority to oversee agency compliance with FOIA. DOJ should be charged with regularly listing agencies as non-compliant or poor performers, demanding compliance plans with specific measurable milestones from lagging agencies, and instituting administrative penalties. In addition, Congress and the administration should consider whether changes should be made within DOJ to ensure OIP has adequate independence to exercise oversight. OIP should continue to develop its assessments and should provide more information about its handling of compliance inquiries.

Similar challenges of independence and authority face OGIS. A FOIA reform bill approved by a House committee in March would strengthen OGIS' independence. However, Congress still needs to ensure that the office receives sufficient resources to carry out its duties, and Congress also should make clearer what sort of compliance review it expects OGIS to undertake.

An adopted amendment to that bill also would task agency inspectors general to review FOIA compliance, which could add a helpful element of oversight. The whole House has yet to take up the bill, and there is not yet a Senate companion bill.

Congress should also establish stronger tools for enforcing FOIA. The law should include stronger penalties, such as mandatory fines and automatic attorney fees recovery for agencies that force requesters to pursue lawsuits and then settle or lose in court.

Beyond reform legislation, Congress should also remain actively engaged in FOIA oversight. Just as the House Oversight Committee's inquiry yielded new insight in this case, Congress can hold agencies accountable by asking questions of its own and by directing GAO to undertake new studies.

Return of the Regulatory Accountability Act: A Veiled Threat to Public Protections

On May 23, Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH) reintroduced the Regulatory Accountability Act (RAA), a serious threat to environmental standards, workplace safety rules, public health, and financial reform regulations. The Regulatory Accountability Act of 2013, (S. 1029, and its counterpart in the House, H.R. 2122), is the latest version of a bill first introduced in 2011 and then again in 2012. The seemingly innocuous legislation is a drastic overhaul of the Administrative Procedure Act that would undermine the regulatory process. Advertised by its sponsors as a bipartisan proposal to improve rulemaking, the RAA would actually do the opposite.

When first introduced in 2011 by Sens. Portman, Mark Pryor (D-AR), and Susan Collins (R-ME), the RAA was criticized by public interest groups, including the Center for Effective Government, regulatory experts, and the American Bar Association's Section of Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice. While the most recent version of the bill has been revised, the proposal would obstruct agencies' ability to protect the public from harm and still poses significant problems.

Puts Costs to Business First

The RAA would override decades of health, safety, and environmental policies by making the cost of regulation to business the principal concern of federal agencies, not protecting the public.

The bill includes a cost-benefit analysis super-mandate, requiring agencies to conduct cost-benefit analysis not only for proposed rules, but for alternatives as well. This analysis must include "direct, indirect, and cumulative" costs and benefits, as well as estimated impacts on jobs, competitiveness, and productivity. The estimated impacts on health and safety are not emphasized alongside the impacts on competitiveness and productivity.

This would turn current law on its head. While many laws require that agencies take costs into account in some fashion, few mandate that agencies rely on formal cost-benefit analysis for all major rules. And some statutes, such as the Clean Air Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the Mine Safety and Health Act, bar agencies from relying on cost-benefit analysis. The RAA would run roughshod over these carefully considered laws by requiring one-size-fits-all cost-benefit analysis for all major rules *and their alternatives*.

In addition to adding new procedural hurdles and cost-benefit analysis requirements to rulemaking, the RAA would dramatically change the substance of regulations by establishing a default rule that an agency adopt the "least costly" rule out of all the alternatives considered, unless it can demonstrate that additional benefits of the more costly rule justify the additional costs. It is unclear what exactly an agency must do to justify the additional benefits of a more costly rule. Agencies with already limited resources and rulemaking timelines may be pressured to choose a weaker, less costly proposal when the burden of analyzing more stringent proposals and the alternatives is too great.

Undermines the Autonomy of Independent Agencies

The RAA would apply these new procedures to independent regulatory agencies, which often have multiple members and are not subject to the day-to-day control of the White House. Currently, such agencies may, but are not required to, forward proposed and final rules to the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) for review.

Congress often establishes an independent agency when it wants certain policies insulated from White House interference. Many of the independent agencies have three to five members with a wide range of political views. The authorizing statutes of independent agencies define the structure, authority, and requirements they must meet to issue a rule; many already have requirements for cost-benefit analyses. The RAA would force all agencies to use a one-size-fits-all cost-benefit analysis regime, even if that regime is incompatible with the agency's authorizing statute or mission.

The bill would also force independent agencies, including the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), to follow guidelines to be established by OIRA.

Expands and Codifies OIRA's Role in Rulemaking

Under the RAA, OIRA's role in the rulemaking process, which is authorized by executive order, not statute, would be codified and expanded. Already, many regulatory experts feel OIRA interferes in the rulemaking process and has too much power. OIRA often makes substantial changes to rules under review, but the review process is not well documented or clear. Instead of reducing OIRA interference and improving transparency, the RAA demands that OIRA issue even more directives to govern agency policy and procedure.

The RAA requires OIRA to establish mandatory guidelines for conducting quantitative and qualitative assessments, issuing major guidance, and conducting risk assessments that include "criteria for selecting studies and models, evaluating and weighing evidence, and conducting peer reviews." Through these guidelines, OIRA will have the final word on how agencies develop and use science to inform their regulatory decision making. OIRA could increase opportunities for political or industry-led interference in agency science by increasing industry control over peer review and giving oversized weight to small pieces of contrary scientific evidence.

Establishes New Expiration Date for All Proposed Rules

The current version of the RAA is, in some respects, worse than earlier iterations. Most crucially, it establishes a novel two-year expiration date, with a possible one-year extension by the agency, on all notices of proposed rulemaking. Agencies that do not finalize rules within two to three years of proposing them would have to abandon the rules and start from scratch at the very beginning of the rulemaking process. This will create an incentive for regulated industries and officials opposed to implementation of a particular law to exploit the current sources of delay in order to "run out the clock" on a rule, thus indefinitely keeping legislation enacted by Congress from being implemented. The significant increase in procedural and analytical requirements that this bill creates, without any commensurate funding, will make it even easier for regulated industries to abuse the expiration date.

Inappropriately Expands Judicial Review

To top it all off, the RAA lowers the standard of judicial deference normally afforded to agencies. For high-impact rules, courts must employ a "substantial evidence" standard of review, which affords significantly less deference to agency expertise than the existing "arbitrary and capricious" standard. Non-expert judges would review agencies' highly technical analyses and have the power to reject rules whenever they determine that those analyses fail to comply with OIRA's one-size-fits-all cost-benefit analysis guidelines. This new and inappropriate role for the courts could mean increased litigation, endless delays, and more uncertainty for regulated industries and the American people.

Conclusion

This time around, the RAA is co-sponsored by nine senators, and the problematic bill remains a threat to a public-interest focused regulatory system. Full of procedural hurdles, inflexible analyses, and opportunities for non-experts to interfere with agency judgments, the latest version of the bill undermines the rulemaking process just as its predecessors did. Congress should be working to improve the process and enhance public protections – this bill is not the way to do that.

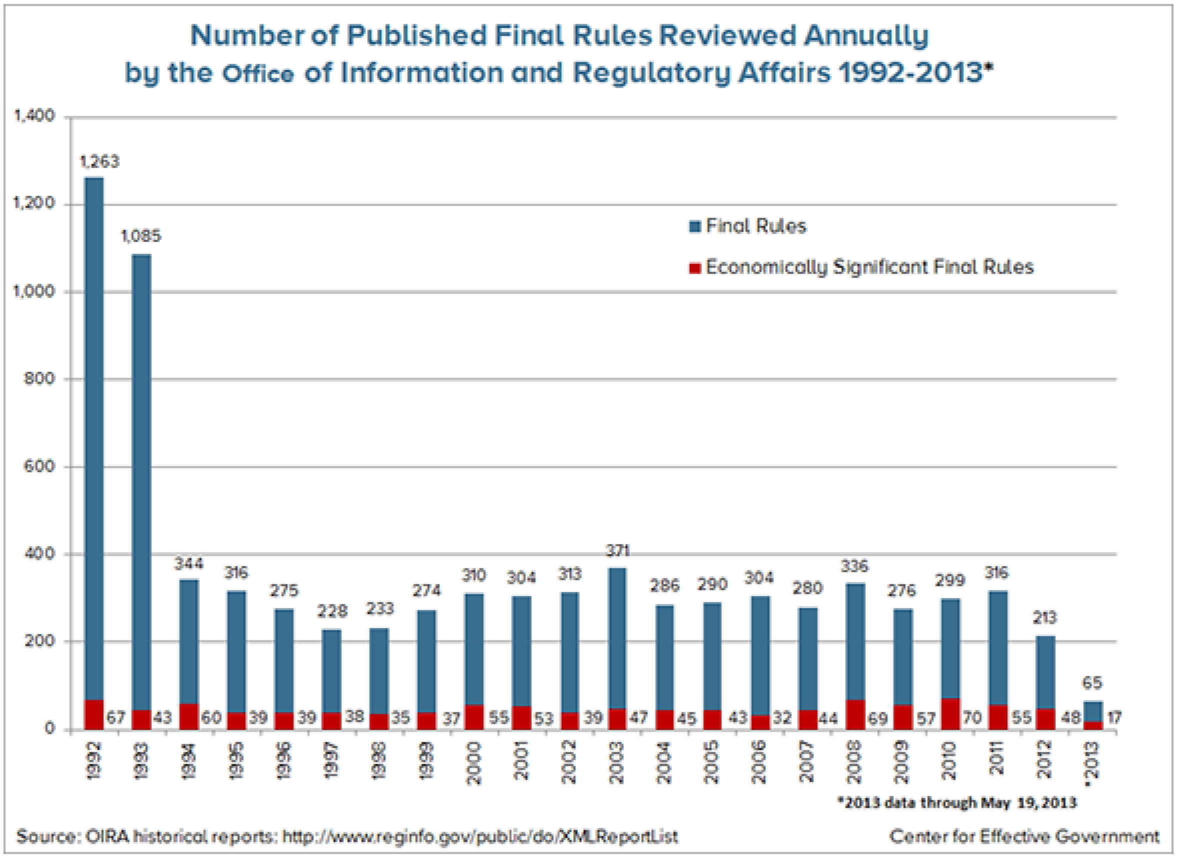
Only a Trickle of New Rules, Not a Wave

The business community and its allies on Capitol Hill have warned for over a year that a "tsunami" of new regulations will be flowing out of the Obama administration, undermining the anemic growth of the economy. To prevent this imagined emergency, they continue to propose draconian "reforms" of the regulatory system – changes that would further delay and obstruct the work of federal agencies attempting to implement the laws they were established to enforce.

Last year, staff at the Center for Effective Government examined these claims. We released an article on July 10 and a more in-depth report on Sept. 27 comparing the rules developed by the Obama administration in its first three years with those developed by the Clinton and Bush administrations during a similar time frame.

Examining trends in federal rulemaking over more than two decades, using data from Reginfo.gov, we found that the pace at which agencies have issued rules has remained fairly steady over the past three administrations. However, there was a noticeable increase in the number of rules with a statutory deadline imposed by Congress when the law was written, raising questions about the veracity of congressional complaints about agencies overstepping their authority. Judicial deadlines also drove some of the increase in rules.

Staff have now updated this analysis to compare the rules finalized in the first 52 months of each president's tenure (to May 19, 2013). Conservatives feared that the Obama White House was waiting to unleash a flood of rules until after the 2012 election was over, but we see no evidence of this.



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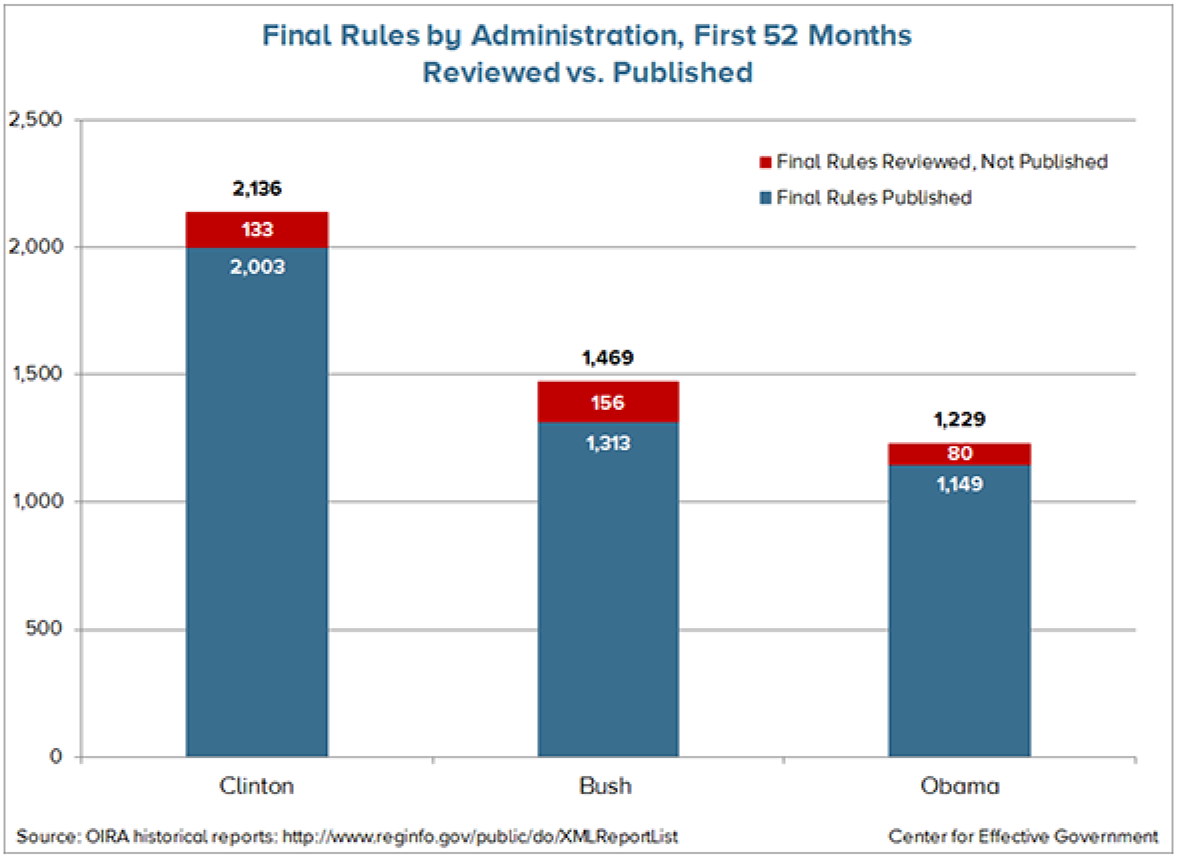
The preceding chart shows the trend in final rules reviewed by OIRA over roughly two decades. Rules published in 2012 represented a recent record low when compared to both the Bush and Clinton administrations. Moreover, the number of economically significant final rules has remained relatively constant.



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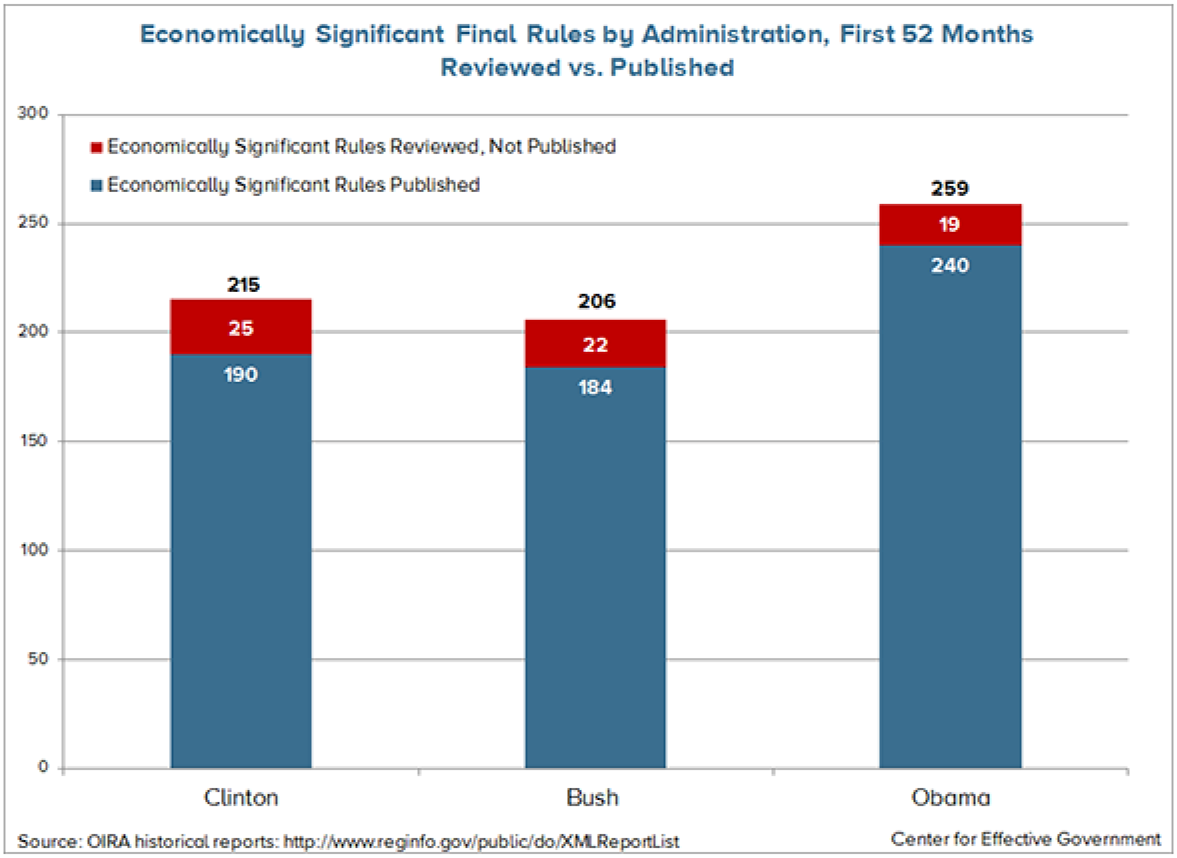
The chart above shows the number of final rules reviewed and published by OIRA in the first 52 months of the three most recent administrations. Final rules published are those that make it through one last review at OIRA and go in to effect. Rules reviewed but not published are put on hold or withdrawn for any number of reasons, including OIRA objections or reconsideration by an agency. Overall, it's clear that agencies are not submitting significantly more rules to OIRA for review under the Obama administration.



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While there has been a notable increase in the number of "economically significant rules" published under the Obama administration, a 20 percent increase in rulemaking after new health care and financial system legislation was enacted seems reasonable. Economically significant rules, as defined by Executive Order 12866, are those that will have an annual economic impact of at least $100 million or will have a material adverse effect on "the economy, productivity, competition, jobs, the environment, public health or safety, or State, local or tribal governments or communities."

During President Obama's first 52 months in office, agencies issued more economically significant rules than earlier administrations did. Fifty-five of the 58 rules developed under the current administration implemented the Affordable Care Act, and three implemented the Dodd-Frank Act (financial reform legislation). When these rules are removed from the analysis, the Obama administration has issued almost exactly the same number of economically significant rules as the Bush administration. These rules, required to implement two laws passed by Congress, represent the entire increase in rules; they will guarantee health care and tighten regulations on the industry that led to the most recent economic downturn.

Of course, all of this emphasis on the number of rules or the total pages in the *Federal Register* ignores the benefits of standards and safeguards. While rules may impose costs on affected businesses, the benefits of public protections typically far outweigh their costs. Under the health care and financial reform rules, for example, these benefits include increased investor protection, a more stable financial structure, less risk-taking among banks, more transparency in consumer charges by banks, and more access to affordable health care for most Americans.

The current anti-regulatory rhetoric in Congress and elsewhere simply does not reflect the facts.

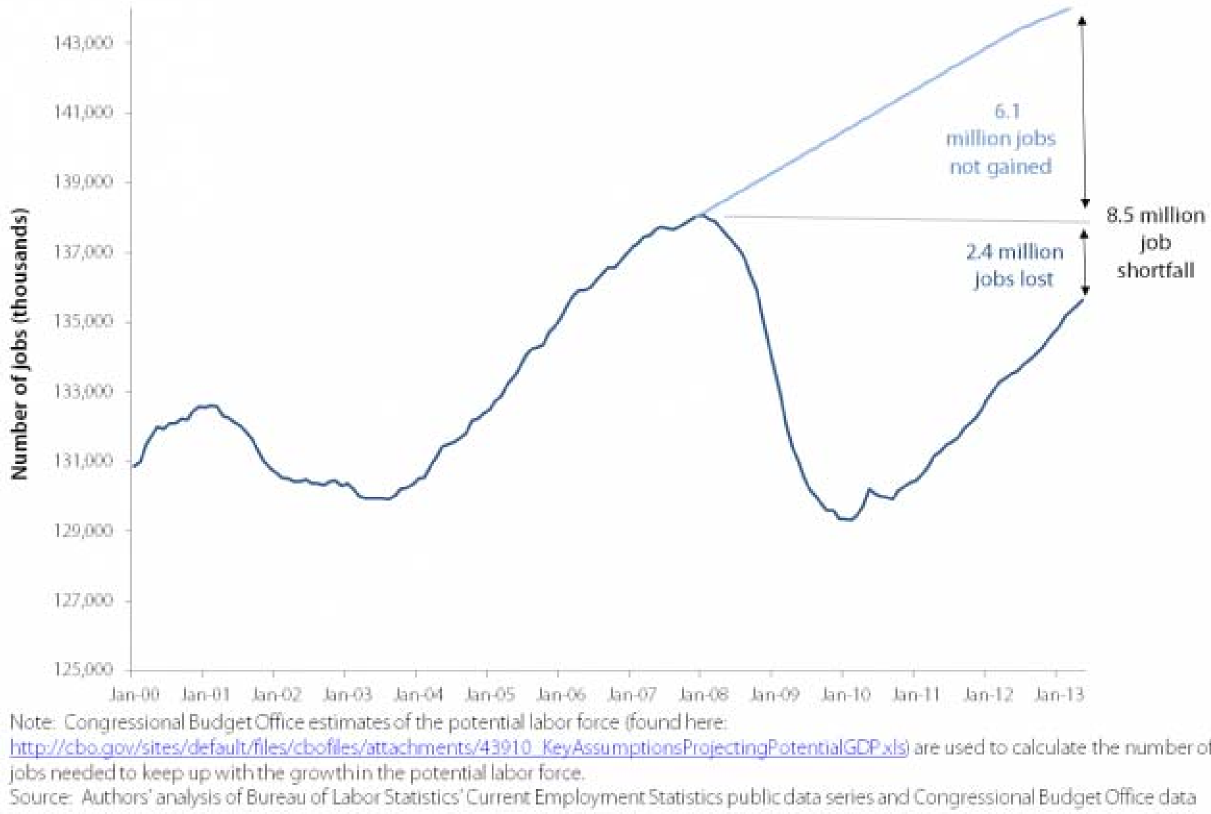
Slashed Public Payrolls Make the Unemployment Problem Worse

Although the private sector has been adding jobs, the United States still has roughly 2.4 million fewer jobs as of May 2013 than it did at the beginning of the latest recession, which started in December 2007, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But the problem is even greater. Given a growing population and the number of discouraged and underemployed workers, to reach an unemployment rate closer to the historical norm, more than 8.5 million jobs need to be created.

Although the private sector is recovering, recent government policies have not been helping. The jobs situation would be substantially better if local, state, and federal governments were not cutting their payrolls. Since the start of the recession, about 528,000 government jobs have been eliminated, and a smaller percentage of the employed workforce works in government. The public sector added some jobs during the official period of the recession, but cut back more steeply since it technically ended. "Since the recovery began in June 2009, the public sector has lost nearly three-quarters-of-a-million jobs (737,000)," the Economic Policy Institute's Heidi Shierholz pointed out. "These losses are an enormous drain on the recovery."

The crunch in the public sector job market is exacerbating the substantial employment needs in the U.S. that are not being met. There are 11.8 million unemployed people; some 4.4 million (37 percent) have been searching for work for more than six months. Some 7.9 million are "involuntary part-time workers" – meaning they work part-time but want full-time work – and 780,000 have stopped searching for work altogether; these people are not counted in the official 7.6 percent unemployment rate.

Massive Jobs Shortfall



Source: Economic Policy Institute

In most recessions since World War II, the government would step in to help create jobs until private sector demand became more robust. But this recession was different. Austerity policies – automatic cuts at the federal level (sequestration) and earlier job cuts at the state and local levels – have left many more Americans jobless many months after the recession was declared over. While fiscal contraction is broader than simply shedding government jobs, the two tend to go hand in hand. As the World Bank explained recently, "A fairly robust private sector recovery is being held back, but not extinguished, by fiscal tightening."

The Washington Post's Ezra Klein went into more detail earlier this year:

> The new numbers the Bureau of Economic Analysis released on fourth-quarter economic growth have received considerable attention for the clear damage that falling government spending did to the economy. According to the BEA, "government consumption expenditures and gross investment" knocked 1.33 percentage points off the total change in economic growth. If government spending had just been neutral — that is to say, if it had neither contracted nor expanded — the economy would have grown by 1.23 percentage points rather than shrunk by 0.1 percentage points.

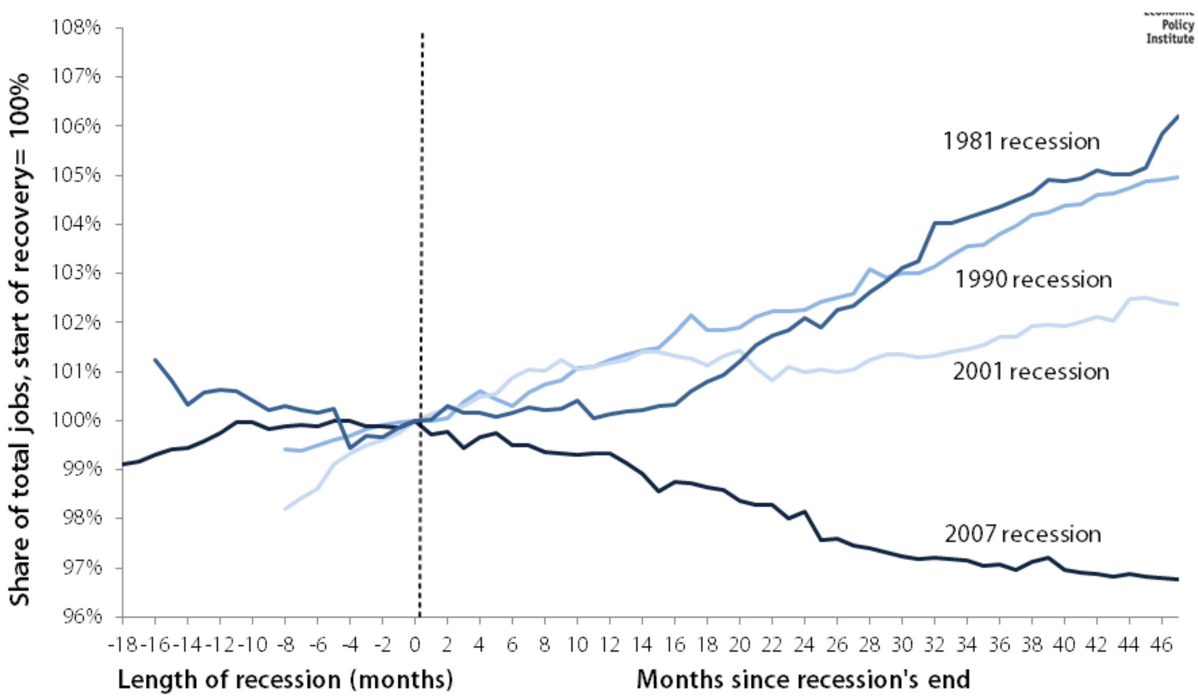
But this isn't the first time that total government spending and investment has been a drag on growth. It pulled growth down by 0.67 percentage points in 2010, .34 in 2011, and .33 in 2012.

At First, Government Expansion Mitigated Job Losses, but Then Austerity Kicked in

Although the recession [technically ended in July 2009](), the private sector on its own has not yet been able to make up for the over 8 million jobs lost in the recession. The lowest employment level occurred in February 2010, when there were 8.8 million fewer people employed than in December 2007.

Between 2008 and 2010, the government did engage in anti-recessionary spending, especially through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, which saved or created 2 to 3 million jobs. However, beginning in fall 2010, the government began shedding jobs in significant quantities.

Government Employment in the Last Four Recoveries



Source: [Economic Policy Institute]()

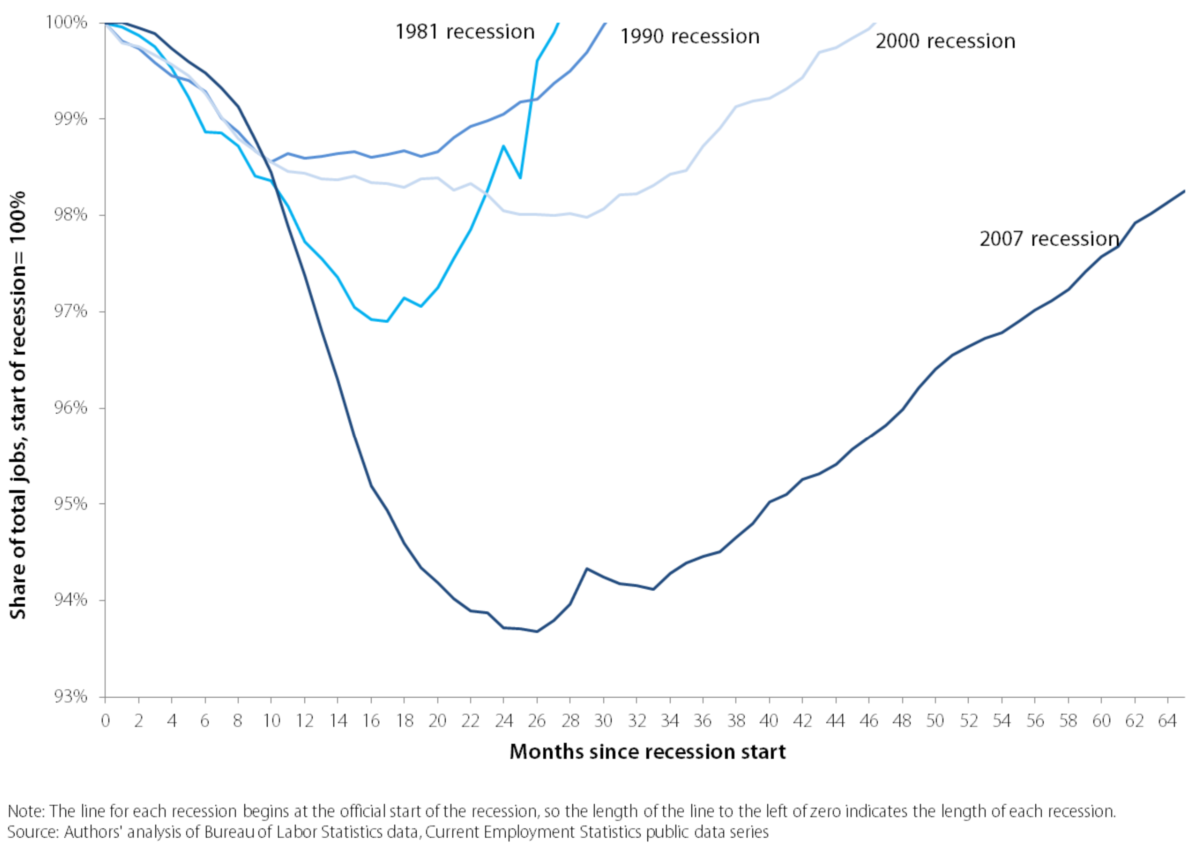
Those job losses have mostly occurred on the [local government level]() – the largest government sector in terms of numbers of jobs – with 427,000 public sector jobs shed from December 2007 to May 2013. State governments followed with 93,000 jobs cut. In the aggregate, state and local government employment appears to have stabilized; however, some states are still experiencing shortfalls and pressure to cut government more.

The federal government, including the U.S. Postal Service, has cut some 6,000 jobs from December 2007 levels. And the sequester and 2012 cuts in discretionary spending appear to be accelerating the number of jobs being cut in recent months. This May, 14,000 federal jobs were cut, and over the past three months, 45,000 federal workers have lost employment.

The "Jobs Deficit"

One of the major differences between the 2007 recession and others in the post-World War II period is the extremely slow pace of job growth post-recession. During past recoveries, the economy was much faster in replacing jobs and growing employment beyond the levels that existed when previous recessions began.

Job Loss and Recovery in the Last Four Recessions



Source: Economic Policy Institute

But we have to do more than get back to the number of jobs in 2007; the labor force is growing and the economy needs to create more jobs to absorb the number of new job seekers. Currently, the labor participation rate has declined to the lowest levels since 1979, although it inched upwards in May. Many economists suggest this means many long-term unemployed have become so discouraged that they have dropped out of the labor force, although this is a source of great debate within the field.

"To get back to the prerecession unemployment rate in three years, we would need to add 320,000 jobs every single month—almost double our current rate," according to the Economic Policy Institute.

The number of jobs added each month has hovered around just 175,000 for the last year.

The economy would be creating more jobs if it was not for the "fiscal drag" created by cutbacks in government spending and employment. And furloughed and laid off public sector workers reduce consumer spending and so reduce private sector employment, too.

Critics Advise the Government to Reverse Course

There is a legitimate debate about the best way government can create jobs – whether indirectly through greater spending on infrastructure and other investments that increase private sector hiring or through direct public sector hiring (school teachers, clean-up crews, etc.) – but in the last few years, the nation has not been having that debate. Instead, austerity-oriented politicians have been entirely focused on cutting down the size of government and immediate deficit reduction.

As the Center for American Progress stated in a recent report: "It is time to hit the reset button and move beyond a single-minded focus on the deficit to ask bigger questions about what investments we should be making in the future and how we should pay for these investments."

Of all the federal budget plans introduced by members of Congress this year, the Congressional Progressive Caucus' plan does the most to promote job growth. It would "boost gross domestic product (GDP) by 5.7 percent and employment by 6.9 million jobs at its peak level of effectiveness (within one year of implementation)," according to projections by the Economic Policy Institute, "while ensuring that fiscal support lasts long enough to avoid future fiscal cliffs that could throw recovery into reverse."

While the economy has begun to slowly recover in the private sector, reductions in public sector spending over the last three years have held back growth and allowed unemployment to remain unconscionably high. The conversation should change. One of the best things we could do to reverse course is to end the slash-and-burn approach to government so prevalent since 2010.

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