

Highlights of [GAO-10-688](#), a report to congressional requesters

## PERSONNEL PRACTICES

### Conversions of Employees from Political to Career Positions, May 2005 - May 2009

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Political appointees in the federal government sometimes seek appointments to career competitive and other positions which, unlike political appointments, do not terminate at the end of an administration. Federal agencies must use appropriate authorities and follow proper procedures in making these conversions. GAO was asked to determine for departments and selected agencies (1) the number and characteristics of all political to career conversions occurring during the period from May 1, 2005, through May 30, 2009, and (2) whether appropriate authorities were used and proper procedures were followed in making these conversions at the GS-12 level and above.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OPM review five of the seven conversions GAO identified where it appears that certain agencies did not adhere to merit system principles, did not follow proper procedures, or may have engaged in prohibited personnel practices, and determine whether additional actions are needed. OPM agreed with this recommendation.

Regarding the remaining two conversions that raised questions, one is currently being reviewed by the Ethics Officer for the agency that made the conversion and the other does not warrant further action in our view as the official solely responsible for the conversion and the convertee are both no longer with the agency.

View [GAO-10-688](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand, (202) 512-6806, [ekstrand@gao.gov](mailto:ekstrand@gao.gov).

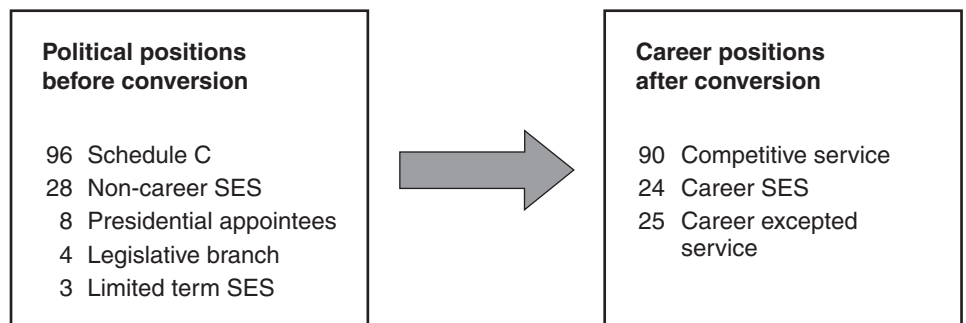
#### What GAO Found

Twenty-six of the 42 departments and agencies selected for review reported converting 139 individuals from political to career positions from May 1, 2005, through May 30, 2009. The other 16 departments and agencies reported making no conversions during this period. Five agencies accounted for 79, or 57 percent, of the 139 reported conversions: the Departments of Justice (32), Homeland Security (17), Defense (13), Energy (9), and Commerce (8).

Agencies appeared to have used appropriate authorities and followed proper procedures in making the majority (92) of the 117 conversions reported at the GS-12 level or higher. However, for seven of these conversions documentation indicates that agencies may not have adhered to merit system principles, followed proper procedures, or may have engaged in prohibited personnel practices or other improprieties. Some of the improper procedures included pre-selecting particular individuals for career positions and selecting former political appointees who appeared to have limited qualifications and/or experience relevant to the career positions. Of the seven conversions, five will be reviewed by OPM; one involves an issue most appropriately reviewed by the agency's ethics officer, and one does not warrant further action as both the official solely responsible for the conversion and the convertee are no longer with the agency. For 18 conversions there was insufficient information to make a determination as to whether appropriate authorities and proper procedures were followed. In some cases this was because the document retention period had passed by the time of our review and agencies no longer maintained the files. In other cases, agencies did not provide enough documentation for us to fully assess the process they used to make the conversion.

Political appointees can bring valuable skills and experience to the federal workforce, and the merit-based conversion of political appointees to career positions can be a useful means to achieving a highly qualified workforce. OPM's newly implemented pre-appointment review of these conversions could help better ensure they are done appropriately.

**Type of Political Positions Converted from and Career Positions Converted to, from May 1, 2005, through May 30, 2009**



Source: GAO's analysis of data reported by departments and selected agencies.