



Probationary Period for Federal Workers

The probationary period for career federal employees dates to the Pendleton Act of 1883, which established the merit-based civil service. It is designed to serve as the final stage in the federal hiring process.

The Merit Systems Protection Board emphasizes that the probationary period should be used as a “job tryout.” The board also notes that “until the probationary period has been completed, a probationer is still an applicant for an appointment, with the burden to demonstrate why it is in the public interest for the government to finalize an appointment to the civil service for this particular individual.”

At the end of the probationary period, individuals become permanent civil servants with appeal rights. While no certification or evaluation is required, supervisors are expected to remove a poorly performing employee before the probationary period elapses.

HOW LONG IS THE PROBATIONARY PERIOD?

Most federal employees are in a probationary period during their first year on the job. In the [competitive service](#), probationers must complete a one-year “probationary period” before receiving their final appointments. In the excepted service, this requirement is typically known as a “trial period” and most commonly lasts two years, although the length may vary.

RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS FOR PROBATIONARY EMPLOYEES

Unlike most federal employees, probationary employees cannot appeal a job termination for performance or conduct reasons. This streamlined termination process allows supervisors to “[quickly and easily correct mistakes that are made in the hiring process](#)” by removing employees who are poor performing or not aligned with their agency’s mission.

When an agency fires a probationary employee who is not meeting performance or [conduct standards](#), its only obligation is to provide a written explanation of its decision and an effective date. According to [federal code](#), this explanation should “at a minimum, consist of the agency’s conclusion as to the inadequacies of [the employee’s] performance or conduct.”

[Prohibited Personnel Practices](#) still apply to employees during their probationary period. This means they are protected from being fired for partisan or political reasons, due to discrimination based on marital status, or as a result of discrimination based on an Equal Employment Opportunity category such as race or gender.

Probationary Period FAQs

How is the federal “probationary” period different from the private sector?

While many private-sector companies use an introductory period to assess newly hired employees, usually the idea of “probation” has a negative connotation. In the federal government “probationary” does not mean that an employee has already performed poorly. Instead, it means they are on a trial period before earning various employment rights.

How frequently do new federal employees fail to complete their probationary period?

Data on the use of probationary periods is not readily available. However, previous studies suggest it is rare for new federal employees to fail to complete their probationary period. A 2005 Merit Systems Protection Board [fact sheet](#) states that only 1.6% of competitive service employees are removed during their first year of service.

Nevertheless, the probationary period has been the most effective way to remove poor performers. A [2015 Government Accountability Office report](#) indicates that 70% of all performance-based removals took place during the probationary period, and [MSPB notes](#) that between 2000 and 2014, 41% of all removals (for performance and conduct) were during the probationary period.

Can probationary employees who are fired appeal their terminations?

Probationary employees who allege that their termination is based on a violation of the Prohibited Personnel Practices may have recourse to an MSPB appeal, an Equal Opportunity Commission complaint or an Office of Special Counsel investigation. This [MSPB fact sheet](#) provides a list of limited circumstances in which a probationary employee may appeal their termination. Probationary employees cannot appeal a job termination for performance or conduct reasons, however employees within a probationary period that have current continuous service from another federal position could have adverse action rights.

Do employees who change roles begin a new probationary period?

Many employees who change roles begin new probationary periods. However, these employees are sometimes entitled to have their probationary periods waived, depending on appointment type, hiring authority, agency, line of work, job duties or the length of interruption to their employment. Employees who transfer directly from one agency to another without a break in service typically are not required to serve a new probationary period, although circumstances vary.

Learn more:

[Federal Employee Resource Hub](#)

[Guide to Understanding Your Notification of Personnel Action Form, SF-50](#) – Block 24 indicates the tenure of your position, including possible probationary status.

Fast Facts

Based on [FedScope's](#) most recent data, we estimate that over **250k** federal workers are currently in their probationary period. Of this total, 147,000 are in the competitive service, 110,000 are in the excepted service, and 400 are in the Senior Executive Service.

A large percentage (around **27%**) of probationary employees are under the age of 30, including 26.2% of competitive service new hires and 27.7% of excepted service new hires.

85% of competitive service new hires and **81%** of excepted service new hires are located outside the Washington, D.C., area. These figures are consistent with the overall percentage of federal workers who are [not based in this region](#).

Estimated federal agencies with the most probationary employees in competitive and excepted service*

1. Department of Veterans Affairs
2. Department of the Army
3. Department of Defense
4. Department of the Treasury
5. Department of Homeland Security

Employees with less than one year of experience have the highest employee engagement and satisfaction scores.

Below are the 2023 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® government-wide scores by agency tenure:

- Less than one year: 75.6/100
- One to five years: 67.4/100
- Six to twenty years: 63.1/100
- More than twenty years: 68.5/100

*Data Note: The data in this fact sheet is based on Office of Personnel Management FedScope records from March 2024, the most recent data available. We estimate the number of employees in their probationary period by approximating the number of workers who have been hired within the last year using the number of workers hired from Jan. 1 through March 30, 2024, and assuming the rate of hiring remained the same for the next three quarters. The data used to estimate the number of probationary excepted service workers only includes those within their first year of employment. Since the probationary period for the excepted service is generally longer than one year, the estimate is likely an undercount.