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The Senior Executive Service: An Overview

The Senior Executive Service (SES) was established by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA; P.L. 95-454) to provide a centralized government-wide cadre of high-level managers within federal agencies. Prior to the SES, agencies used a fragmented set of hiring authorities to fill positions in the “supergrades”—generally career positions on the General Schedule (GS) above Grade 15 (GS-15) that were covered by the same adverse-action procedures that applied to other career civil servants. The SES comprises mostly career appointees who are chosen through a merit staffing process and serve in policy, supervisory, and managerial positions above GS-15. Most agencies have SES members, but some agencies are exempted by statute, including government corporations and certain intelligence and financial regulatory agencies.

The SES was intended to create a link between the politically appointed leadership of agencies and career civil servants. The SES was to ease friction caused by sometimes differing objectives between these two groups. The creation of the SES was also partly intended to ease the transition period for new Presidents and their political appointees by providing incoming Administrations with a flexible, responsive set of experienced leaders who could ensure that agencies were running smoothly through the change in leadership and beyond.

SES Positions and Appointment Types

The SES has two types of positions: *career reserved* and *general*. Approximately half of SES positions are career reserved, and the other half are general. Agencies request SES positions from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) based on their managerial needs. The CSRA tasked the allocation and designation of SES positions (along with other responsibilities relating to the SES) to OPM.

Positions in the SES may be filled using one of three appointment types: *career*, *noncareer*, and *limited*. The type of position determines, in part, what type of appointment may be made to fill it. Career reserved positions may be filled *only* by career appointment, while general positions may be filled by any of the three types of appointment (career, noncareer, or limited). For a breakdown of SES membership by appointment type, see **Table 1**.

Position Types: Career Reserved

By law (5 U.S.C. §3132(b)(1)) and regulation (5 C.F.R. §214.402), certain types of positions must be removed from political influence to ensure public confidence in the impartiality of certain government functions. Career reserved positions are those that involve day-to-day functions of government and require such impartiality. Examples include positions engaged in audits, inspections, civil or criminal law enforcement, grants administration,

and security matters—the principal duties of which involve day-to-day government operations. Career reserved positions may be filled only by career appointees through a merit staffing process, which is discussed below. OPM publishes an annual list of SES positions it has designated as career reserved in the *Federal Register*.

Position Types: General

General positions are those remaining positions in the SES that do not meet the criteria for a career reserved position. General positions may be filled by career, noncareer, or limited term appointment. Because of statutory limitations on the total number of noncareer and limited appointees, discussed below, most general positions are filled by career appointees.

An agency may convert a position from career reserved to general or vice versa, but such a switch requires OPM’s approval. General positions are listed in the Plum Book (*U.S. Government Policy and Supporting Positions*), which is published every four years (each presidential election year) and lists all positions to which noncareer appointments can be made.

Appointment Types: Career Appointments

Most SES positions, including all career reserved positions and most general positions, are filled through career appointment. Career appointments must use a merit staffing process regardless of whether the underlying position is career reserved or general.

In general, the steps of the merit staffing process are as follows: the agency advertises the position; candidates submit applications; the agency’s rating panel reviews and ranks candidates; the agency’s Executive Resources Board recommends the best-qualified candidates; the appointing authority selects a candidate and certifies that he or she meets the qualifications for the SES and the position; the agency submits the candidate’s application package to an OPM-administered Qualifications Review Board for certification; and, if approved, the agency appoints the candidate to the position. Agencies may also have some ability to reinstate a former career SES member or hire an individual directly from an SES candidate development program if certain conditions are met.

By statute, career appointees typically serve a one-year probationary period and, following the conclusion of the period, may be removed from the SES only for cause or poor performance.

Appointment Types: Noncareer Appointments

Noncareer SES appointments do not require a merit staffing process. Agencies must obtain approval from OPM and the

White House Office of Presidential Personnel for each noncareer appointment. The agency head must certify that the appointee is qualified for the position.

Noncareer appointments can be made only to general positions. Because noncareer appointments do not require a merit staffing process, noncareer appointees to the SES are commonly described as political appointees.

By law, a maximum of 10% of staffed SES positions government-wide may be filled by noncareer appointees. This percentage varies across agencies, however, and may be up to 25% in any individual agency. In practice, the 10% cap is sometimes exceeded. When a noncareer appointee leaves his or her position, the agency must request approval from OPM again to fill the position. Noncareer appointees lack the removal protections of career appointees.

Appointment Types: Limited Appointments

Limited appointments are used to appoint the head of a specific project or meet an agency's unanticipated, urgent need and may be used only to fill general positions for a specified period of time. Limited appointments are used to fill temporarily established positions and may last up to three years—or up to 18 months for a limited emergency appointment.

By law, limited appointments may not exceed 5% of all SES positions. OPM generally allocates limited appointment authority on a case-by-case basis, but each agency has a small pool of limited authority (3% of their total SES position allocation) that may be available under certain circumstances. Limited appointees do not have removal protections.

Table 1. SES Membership by Appointment Type, May 2026

Appointment Type	Number of Senior Executives
Career	5,805
Noncareer	801
Limited	45
Total	6,651

Source: OPM, "Federal Workforce Data: Table Builder."

SES Pay

The typical compensation package for career senior executives is a performance-based pay system that includes salary (basic pay) and performance awards (bonuses).

Basic Pay

SES compensation falls within pay ranges that are established by law. The pay ranges are tied to the pay for the GS and the Executive Schedule.

The minimum rate of basic pay for the SES is 120% of the rate of basic pay for GS-15, Step 1. The maximum rate depends on whether the agency has an OPM-certified performance appraisal system (see **Table 2**). To obtain OPM certification, the agency must have an appraisal system that makes meaningful distinctions based on relative

performance. For agencies without an OPM-certified system, SES pay may not exceed the rate payable for Level III of the Executive Schedule. For agencies with an OPM-certified system, SES pay may not exceed the rate payable for Level II of the Executive Schedule. Members of the SES do not receive locality pay.

Table 2. Basic Pay for Members of the SES, 2026

Structure of the SES Pay System	Minimum	Maximum
Agencies with an OPM-certified SES performance appraisal system	\$151,661	\$228,000
Agencies without an OPM-certified SES performance appraisal system	\$151,661	\$209,600

Source: OPM, "2026 Executive & Senior Level Employee Pay Tables."

Performance Awards

Career appointed members of the SES may also be eligible for performance awards. Each agency head approves performance awards based on recommendations by the agency's Performance Review Board. Typically, the amount of an individual award must be between 5% and 20% of the executive's basic pay. Agencies are limited in how much total money they may allocate for performance awards each year.

Career appointed executives can also be nominated for Presidential Rank Awards to recognize sustained (Meritorious Rank) and sustained extraordinary (Distinguished Rank) accomplishments. Meritorious Rank recipients may earn a payment of 20% of their annual basic pay, and recipients of the Distinguished Rank may earn a payment of 35% of their annual basic pay.

Career appointed senior executives may also be eligible for other awards based on a special act or service, suggestion, invention, superior accomplishment, or productivity gain.

Recent Developments

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued a memorandum entitled "Restoring Accountability for Career Senior Executives" that instructed OPM and agency heads to take several actions that have generally aligned with the Administration's broader federal workforce reshaping strategy to increase presidential control and political responsiveness. For example, OPM directed agencies to redesignate certain types of positions so that they may be filled through noncareer (political) appointment instead of remaining reserved for career appointment; required agencies to adopt a standardized SES performance appraisal system; and limited the number of senior executives who can receive high-level performance ratings.

Taylor N. Riccard, Analyst in Government Organization and Management

Maeve P. Carey, Specialist in Government Organization
and Management

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