

# The Impact of Recruitment Strategy on Fair and Open Competition for Federal Jobs

Research Highlights



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Since the Pendleton Act of 1883, it has been a basic precept that entry into the federal civil service should be based on merit after fair and open competition. Congress codified this ideal as part of the first merit principle in 1978 via the Civil Service Reform Act. However, the complexities of Federal civil service laws, regulations, and practices make it difficult to define what constitutes “fair and open competition.”

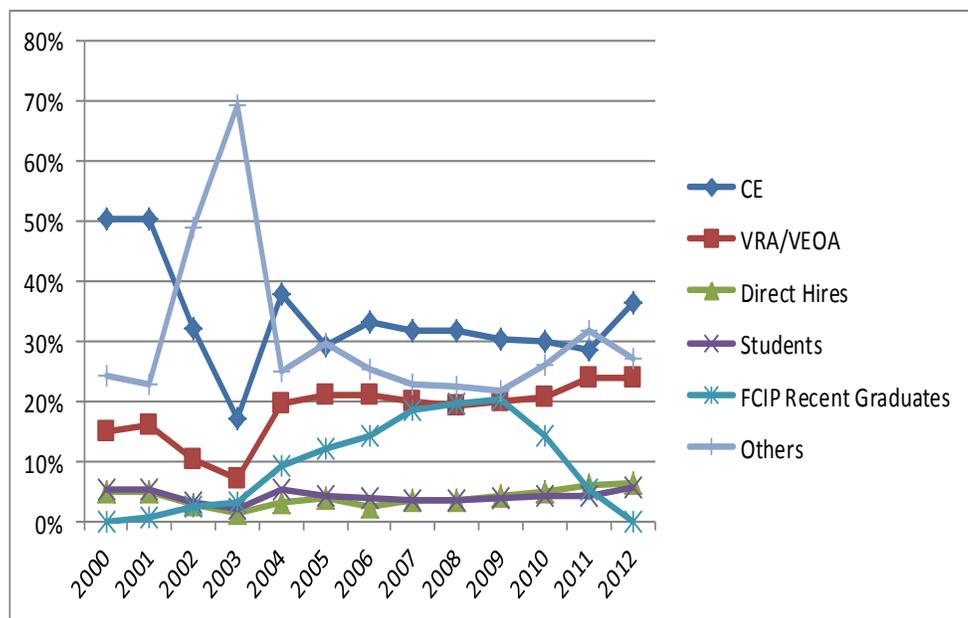
While what is “fair” or “open” often depends on one’s perception, there are some factors that threaten the principle of fair and open competition. These include: a proliferation of hiring authorities that restrict the size and composition of the applicant pool; overuse of restrictive hiring authorities and practices; the possibility that some managers may deliberately misuse hiring flexibilities to select favored candidates; and some HR staff placing customer service to individual supervisors over service to the agency and its obligations to protect merit and avoid prohibited personnel practices.

Each step in the recruitment process is an opportunity to keep the recruitment action fair and open—or to close it to some degree. However, it is often hard to determine, at any step, which choice best serves the principle of fair and open competition and the broader public interest.

How agencies announce their vacancies affects every part of the recruitment process. For example, job vacancies were frequently announced to a wide audience, in 2012, but only 37 percent of new employees were hired via traditional competitive examining procedures.

Additionally, since 2000, the use of restrictive hiring authorities has increased, while traditional competitive examining has decreased. This may be an indication that there may be some difficulty with the competitive examining (CE) authority. That is, agencies may perceive some difficulty or inefficiency with CE, such that approximately two out of every three hiring actions avoid using it to make a selection. The decreased use of CE is a problem because CE is the only hiring authority that is open to all qualified U.S. citizens. As a result, as more restrictive authorities are used to hire Federal employees, the less fair and open the system may be.

Authorities used to hire new employees, 2000-2012



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