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# Managerial flexibility versus employee-friendly flexibility: the internal labour market of Taiwan's civil service

**Bennis Wai Yip So** & **Hsin-Chung Liao**

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## Abstract

This article addresses the highly flexible internal labour market of Taiwan's civil service that is quite different from the corresponding labour markers in the West. In contrast to managerial flexibility that is popular in the West, Taiwan's system – as employee-friendly flexibility – allows for a high degree of flexible choices in job transfers for junior civil servants. The system, which has not been influenced by ideas of new public management, is conducive to a high degree of job mobility for civil servants during their early career paths. On the positive side, this job mobility broadens the experiences of civil servants for career advancement, mitigates conflicts caused by a poor person-environment fit, breaks through the promotion bottleneck, and helps the state retain

In this article



...e, it makes manpower planning difficult, causes an internal  
...es withdrawal behaviour. An analysis of it contributes to the

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understanding of public human resource management in a non-Western context, which shows a different logic of development from the West.

Keywords: [civil service system](#), [internal labour market](#), [management flexibility](#), [flexible job transfers](#), [Taiwan](#)

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## Introduction

Public sector reform in many countries has promoted a more flexible internal labour market in government, with more job mobility being encouraged to create more flexibility in management. This has been a significant development, with the drivers usually, but not always, being founded in ideas of new public management (NPM). Thus, in Taiwan, the civil service system is now one of the most flexible in the world in allowing job mobility for its civil servants, but this has had different drivers and has followed a different logic than that of NPM.

This article addresses how Taiwan's civil service system makes an internal labour market possible, with a focus on the core mechanism of job mobility. It evaluates the pros and cons of the mechanism by reviewing the reasons for job transfers, as well as its impacts.

The underlying argument is that the flexibility advocated by NPM is a form of managerial flexibility, while Taiwan's version is essentially employee-friendly flexibility. The former is promoted to allow public managers more flexibility in the allocation of human resources, whereas the latter allows civil servants themselves a high degree of flexibility in job transfers. An analysis of the latter contributes to an understanding of a significant aspect of human resource management in a particular context, as well as more broadly providing insights and lessons concerning an alternative to the more standard approach based on management intervention.

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## Internal labour market: managerial flexibility and employee-friendly flexibility

In this article



system is conceptualised by Doeringer and Piore (1971) as a  
organisation. in which the pricing and allocation of labour are

governed by a set of administrative rules and procedures. Job vacancies are filled by promoting or transferring workers who have already gained entry into a firm or industry. Hence, the system is different from an external labour market especially in the sense that the latter recruits manpower from a free labour market, whereas the former deploys the labour available in an organisation or industry.

The difference between the two markets rests not only on the sources of labour, but also on staffing methods and the allocative structure of the two markets. The external market is governed by market forces predictable by conventional economic theory. By contrast, the rules governing an internal market in a firm accord certain rights and privileges to the internal labour force, while constraining members' career path. In the internal, job allocation is determined less by market choices and more by administrative rules, with the flexibility of choices relying on the rigidity of rules: the less rigid the rules, the greater the market forces manifest in resource allocation.

Typically, an internal labour market is a highly structured market comprising a series of job ladders. Job mobility usually works in a vertical pattern moving up along one of the job ladders in an organisation. Movement from one ladder to another may occur for similar job clusters, or from the top of one ladder to other ladders that contain higher ceilings (Pinfield, 1995). Opportunities are offered for employees to develop and advance their careers in an organisation or job cluster, and for managers to mobilise existing human resources to respond to ever-changing skill demands of jobs. Also, labour turnover is likely to be diminished, as more career advancement opportunities are offered to in-house staff.

The idea of an internal labour market received little attention from public administration researchers before the 1990s. Wise (1996) was the first to employ it in studies of a civil service system. Since then, it has become a significant dimension in comparative works on civil service systems (e.g., Burns & Bowornwathana, 2001; Van der Meer, 2011). Its focus for the public sector is usually associated with breaking through the rigidity of the classification system prevailing across various civil service systems. This is reinforced by the ideology of NPM that advocates flexible human resources management and the deregulation of rules limiting managerial discretion (OECD, 1990). In practice, most reforms related to flexibility and deregulation have concentrate on expanding non-civil-

Interagency or interdepartmental people mobility remains rare in a general sense (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011a). The institutions in the United States and most countries in Western Europe, including Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Norway, reportedly do not encourage such mobility (Christensen, 2011; Díez, 2011; Goetz, 2011; Horton, 2011; Lewanski & Toth, 2011; Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011a, 2011b). Even though such mobility is allowed in France as facilitated by its career-based system, complex procedures for applying for transfers actually discourage the practice (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011).

The exceptions are senior civil servants. They are sometimes separately managed as a special group or category and allow for more job mobility or secondment among departments to enrich their experience for managerial positions (Kuperus & Rode, 2008; OECD, 2008). For example, in the Netherlands in 1995, the senior civil service was formed as a separate group for top civil servants, with members having to change positions at least every seven years to stimulate interdepartmental mobility and promote a service-wide professionalism (Steen & van der Meer, 2007). A similar practice is applied to the entrants of the British civil service through the fast stream development programme (Greer & Jarman, 2011; Lægreid & Wise, 2007).

The managerial basis of the approach to flexibility is to let managers manage by giving them more leeway and discretion in human resources management. Centralised uniform personnel rules and regulations are considered an obstacle to the development of an internal market (Wise, 1996); thus, devolution and deregulation are advocated to address the problem. Managerial flexibility remains a top-down approach in the sense that the practices involved, including job mobility, are planned and coordinated by public managers for the benefit of organisational development.

By contrast, the approach to employee-friendly flexibility addressed here works in a centralised career-based system with a high degree of uniformity of personnel rules and regulations. A majority of the staff in the system enjoy a high degree of freedom to select vacancies available in the internal market. Simply put, if a civil servant is qualified for a vacancy released by another department or government agency and the vacancy is only open to incumbent civil servants, the civil servant can apply for the position. Their superiors usually allow them to leave their current position if they receive a job offer. In

friendly workplace policies and programmes are emphasised, at the same time as bureaucratic practices and culture being maintained.

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## **Background of the flexible internal market in Taiwan's civil service system**

### **The institutional setting**

The civil service system in Taiwan is characterised by its centralised personnel management, with an independent state-level organ, the Examination Yuan, making most public personnel policies and administering all civil service examinations. Entrants are recruited to the service rather than to ministries or agencies. Recruitment, selection, and placement for external entrants are centrally controlled and coordinated by the Examination Yuan to minimise favouritism or patronage by public managers and political officers. Government agencies, namely employers, play no part in staffing from the external labour market, except offering vacancies before examinations and advice on examination methods. Hence, Taiwan's civil service is embedded in a highly rigid and centralised career-based system. Paradoxically, such a centralised system facilitates the establishment of a nationwide civil service internal labour market.

The civil service workforce is founded in a uniform system that enhances the transferability of staff in a gigantic state entity. Uniformity is first realised by a common ranking system. All staff positions in the central and local governments of Taiwan, except for several particular services such as police, customs and the judiciary, fit into a single common 14-grade hierarchical pyramid: grades 1 to 5 are in the elementary rank, grades 6 to 9 are in the junior rank, and grades 10 to 14 are in the senior rank. Civil service entrance examinations offer three levels of external labour market ports of entry: elementary-level examinations for entrants to Grade 1 positions, junior-level for entrants to Grade 3 positions, and senior-level for entrants to Grades 6–9 positions. Separate special examinations consistent with these three levels are organised by the Examination Yuan for recruiting staff for certain particular services and some local government vacancies. Regardless of which port the entrants enter, they enjoy opportunities to be promoted from the bottom to the top grade (Hwa, [2001](#)).

facilitates lateral mobility (Hsu, 2006). Entrants recruited from various examination levels are classified into a specific grade and professional group (96 groups in total) according to the disciplines of examinations they take. Similar professional groups form a professional cluster (43 clusters in total). Professional groups are divided into two categories: administrative (45 groups) and technical (51 groups).

Positions affiliated with various professional groups span one to three grades, and positions of each professional group span a wide range of agencies. A transfer is allowed to any position of the same grade in the same professional group, in various groups in the same cluster, or in related professional groups in diverse clusters across agencies.

Job transfer between the administrative and technical categories is also possible, but it is more typical for an official from a position in the technical category to move to a position in the administrative category. Professional groups, clusters, and categories impose no constraint on the lateral transfer of officials who are Grade 12 and over, who are typically top career officials in government. Civil servants with qualifications required by professional groups other than their original affiliated professions can also enter those professional groups.

The feasibility of such a flexi-transfer is facilitated by the discretion for public managers of various agencies to selectively, albeit with constraints, fill vacancies. They can do this either through the external labour market via the civil service examinations, or internally. Hence, the internal labour market offers more opportunities for lateral and vertical movements than its counterparts do in other systems.

Job mobility in an internal market system also differs from the typical pattern in that the movements work in the form of upward mobility within a job ladder, and from the ceiling of lower-tiered job ladders to the bottom of higher-tiered job ladders (DiPrete, 1989). This opens a movement path among job ladders on the same tiers by allowing lateral transfers of officers at the same grade between different professional groups; thus, there is no need to restart from the lowest grade or rank.

## The origin and evolution of the system

political system, but the basic framework of the bureaucratic system underwent no significant change under the new republic, other than in terms of a layer of political appointees being put on the top of the system. The most obvious retained feature was the adoption of a 9-grade ranking system, consistent with the traditional Mandarin system (Ou, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

The Nationalist government founded by the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party) in Nanjing in 1927 further upheld the traditional civil service system by establishing the Examination Yuan in 1930 to strengthen and institutionalise the traditional civil service examination, and to centralise the personnel administration of the state. That system was transplanted into Taiwan when the Kuomintang regime retreated to the island in 1949 (Lu, 2011).

The Chinese Mandarin system featured a “generalist-oriented” rank-in-person system, allowing promotion from the lowest grade to the highest; it contained no professional groupings and no demarcation of the civil service between the central and local governments (Hwa, 2001). The Kuomintang government retained the system. Except for some particular types of officials such as the police, customs, judiciary and diplomatic service that were separately managed and regulated by special personnel codes, all other civil servants were considered as a single personnel category, not being classified into specific professions, even though they entered the civil service through different professional categories of examinations (Hsu, 2007). That means that the deployment and transfer of civil servants within the general government administration was highly flexible at that time, with no formal institution or mechanism to regulate transfers.

Such a personnel system was poorly professional, so the Kuomintang government sought to introduce a sort of professional grouping as early as its ruling in Mainland China. The position classification system of the United States was targeted for an institutional transfer. However, it was not realised until the 1950s when the United States was clearly in alliance with the Kuomintang regime after the outbreak of the Korean War. After a long period of studying and review, the US system was transplanted into Taiwan and officially implemented in 1969 (Lu, 2011). A 14-grade rank-in-position replaced the original 9-grade rank-in-person system.



and career advancement of civil servants. Job promotions and all transfers between class series had to pass through examinations. That was too complicated and erected too many obstacles to personnel management. A large number of class series (totally 159 in number) which were divided under the system further obstructed its flexible deployment. It was criticised on the grounds that it was incompatible with thousands of years of the “generalist-oriented” culture of the Chinese mandarin state (Hsu, 2006; Hwa, 2001).

The current joint rank-in-person and in-position system is a compromise between rank-in-person and position classification. This hybrid system seeks to return to the original rank-in-person system and, at the same time, to retain some elements of the position classification system, including the 14-grade ranking system (which became a rank-in-person and in-position arrangement), and the professional division of positions, while relaxing the constraints of lateral transfers between professional groups and downsizing the number of class series (totally 53 in 1987) (Hsu, 2006).

Lateral transfers between agencies also later became institutionalised. Before the enactment of the Civil Service Promotion and Transfer Act (2000), the operation of interagency transfers was not transparent and open. There was no open information of job vacancies for the transfers available. The transfers always relied on favouritism and personal connections, with managers exercising much power to control internal recruitment. In response, since 2000, if a vacancy is open to incumbent civil servants in other agencies, the vacancy must be openly posted on the agency’s website or a central personnel website. All procedures of the recruitment are more regulated by the new law, such that a quasi-free job market was formed exclusively for incumbent civil servants.

A direct consequence of the flexi-internal market is the rise of active transfers among agencies; though, no accurate official data are available on the full extent of such transfers. The number of inter-organisational transfers varied from approximately 13,000 to more than 17,000 each year between 2006 and 2015 (with a total civil service workforce of approximately 340,000, excluding contract-based and temporary staff), resulting in an annual inter-organisational turnover rate of over 4%: see Table 1. These transfers included involuntary inter-organisational job transfers, including top-down assignments and regular rotations for certain specific positions.





## Research methods

As a basis for evaluating the causes and impacts of active transfers, in-depth interviews were conducted with civil servants, along with an analysis of personnel data retrieved from the official public personnel data bank, which collects on-going updated personnel information from all civil servants across Taiwan. The interviewees included 77 civil servants from the central and local government agencies in various locations, involving a wide range of professional groups and different grades who have experienced active transfers to other agencies and/or other professional groups. The interviews facilitated the identification of the circumstances and motivations behind job transfers, and the assessment of the impacts of the mobility on management.

For the data analysis, personnel information of new entrants of the cohorts from 2003 to 2010 was retrieved from the data bank to trace job mobility from 2008 to 2015.<sup>2</sup> The data set comprises 60,957 valid samples, of which 45,607 geographical job transfers were identified. The data were processed by ArcGIS, a mapping software, to conduct statistical analyses and to aggregate all transfer flows into line maps that illustrate the intensity of geographical mobility of the civil servants. This assisted with assessing the quantitative impacts of mobility, as well as substantiating the findings from the interviews.

## Causes of active mobility in the flexi-internal labour market

According to the interviews, family reunion has been the primary reason why staff have applied for a job transfer. While most civil servants prefer working in a place close to their home, no job matching occurs between employers and new entrants. The positions of all newly appointed civil servants are centrally assigned by personnel authorities

agencies. In this regard, job mismatching not only occurs for low score entrants, but also for those whose hometowns offer few or no vacancies. Accordingly, many new entrants have searched for alternative positions through the internal labour market as early as their first day of duty as a post-examination job matching.

In response to the brain drain of new entrants, a restriction on free transfers was imposed on new entrants in 2007, disallowing those from the general civil service examinations to transfer to other agencies under different ministry or department lines in their first year of service. Since 2014, this restriction has been extended to three years. Recruits from special examinations face stricter restrictions on transfers. For those who entered through the special examination for local government vacancies, entrants cannot be transferred to other agencies in their first three years of service and to other agencies outside their affiliated region in their second three years of service, which amounts to a six-year limitation on transfers.

Mismatching and brain drain problems cannot be solved by the restrictions alone. Civil servants have still tended to search for vacancies once they have completed their first three years of service. In fact, some examinees have strategically taken the examinations for disciplines that offer more job vacancies or are easier to pass, no matter which job vacancies have been available. This is because once they have entered the civil service, they have had the opportunity to move to a more desirable position at some point early in their careers.

Active transfers have been caused not only by post-examination job matching, but also by other factors, such as career advancement, work stress, poor interpersonal relationships in the workplace, or repulsive job characteristics. Some civil servants have had a history of moving to other positions or agencies: for example, 38% of interviewees had had more than one active transfer, with the maximum being up to six transfers. Usually vacancies are for middle-to-low-level positions below Grade 10.<sup>3</sup> Job transfers for officials in the senior rank are usually assigned and controlled by superiors. These senior officials are usually confined to a specific ministry or department line or profession group, despite no legal restriction being imposed on transfers of officials in Grade 12 and over.

government agencies, followed by agencies of centrally-administered municipalities because these agencies offer a larger number of higher level positions. By contrast, staff have tended to avoid transferring to grassroots agencies due not only to the lack of opportunities for career advancement, but also to repulsive job characteristics, such as completing tasks in response to the specific demands and conflicts of local people and political powers.

Due to democratisation, the political responsiveness of civil servants has been strengthened, which has led to increasing work stress and, in turn, actively-sought transfers. A recent example is the wave of transfers caused by the newly elected mayor of Taipei City, Ko Wen-je, whose tough leadership style reportedly caused 658 active transfers out of this significant municipal government in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

## Impacts of the flexi-internal labour market

### Mobility patterns

According to the analysis of manpower mobility from the data set, and consistent with the interview findings, there were more transfers into than out of central government agencies for all of years examined (2008–2015): see [Table 2](#). In addition, the frequency of interagency transfers was higher for centrally-administered municipalities than for other municipalities, which indicates that there are more job opportunities in the former than in other local governments. The centrally-administered municipalities in North Taiwan – Taipei City, New Taipei City, and Taoyuan City – had the most transfers in and out, making these areas primary core areas in terms of transfers. Taipei City is the most significant local government in North Taiwan, as it is capital and, thus, the seat of most central government agencies.

Table 2. Number of transfers to and from central government agencies in the data set (2008–2015).



CSV   Display Table

did into poor local governments, remote areas, and outlying islands, though the frequency of interagency transfers in these areas was lower than in other areas. Most people who passed the civil service examinations were not from these areas, with the entrants tending to move back to their hometowns or to prosperous areas.

For professional groups, the data show that the frequency of transfers has been highest in the administrative category. In that category, staff in various professional administrative groups have tended to transfer to the general administration group because it contains higher level or more managerial positions. Transfers from the technical to administrative category have also been significant, particularly for certain professional groups that have faced a lack of staff. For example, of all groups in the technical category, the civil engineering group has registered the highest transfer rate to one of the administrative groups, because the civil engineering group contains several repulsive job characteristics, including a high risk of being implicated in corruption allegations.

## Positive impacts

In addition to solving the problem of job mismatch caused by the civil service examination system, the flexi-internal labour market offers significant opportunities to broaden the experience of civil servants and to improve their overall quality. Developing such a boundary-less career is ideal from the perspective of human resources management (Äijälä, 2002; Arthur, 1994). Thus, the career paths of a few of the interviewees spanned across a number of professional areas. For example, one interviewee started as a veterinary professional, moved to agricultural administration, swapped to general administration, and then changed to social administration. Another started as a nursing professional, moved to the sanitary-cum-environment protection group, swapped to general administration, and then changed to personnel administration.

This employee-friendly flexibility helps mitigate conflicts caused by a poor person-job fit or a poor person-organisation fit. It is especially true from the needs-supplies perspective, which focuses on employees' needs, desires, or preferences met by jobs (Edwards, 1991). Even without such a poor fit or misfit, many interviewees preferred to change their positions every three years to avoid monotonous tasks, to learn more skills



those goals. For career advancement, some interviewees complained that they faced a promotion bottleneck in their agencies or that it was difficult for staff in certain professions to be promoted. Moving to another agency or changing to another profession was a shortcut for them.

In essence, the flexi-internal labour market helps the state retain talent; thus, the voluntary turnover rate of civil servants (by resignation) is extremely low, ranging from 0.1 to 0.2%: see [Table 1](#).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it does not help specific talent retention for individual agencies or levels of government.

## Negative impacts

Despite the positive impacts, there are several negative impacts, particularly from a managerial perspective. The flexi-internal labour market makes human resource planning very difficult for those agencies with a high turnover rate. It is impossible for public managers to develop a succession plan or carry out talent management if they cannot control or anticipate who will move out of their agencies or units in the near future.

In principle, public managers have the authority to disapprove a transfer of their staff to other agencies. In practice, however, they seldom exercise this power unless the shortage of staff reaches a critical point or there is a prior informal agreement about the restriction of transfer for entrants. Public managers sometimes manage to delay transfers rather than disapprove them if they find it difficult to fill vacancies immediately. For agencies and positions that are not difficult to fill from either the internal market or the external market, such as positions in the central government agencies and centrally-administered municipalities, the managers are less motivated to obstruct transfers. Also, according to the interviews, in cases of family reunion and promotion, public managers are not supposed to disapprove transfers. Significantly, most public managers have experienced such a path of transfers themselves, and there is no justification for them to change this custom.

The difficulty of controlling or managing mobility represents an internal brain drain within the state and among professions. It may lead to instability of performance in frontline services or routine tasks. For those agencies or units that find it difficult to fill

agencies usually fill vacancies from the external market, but typically they can only retain recruits for a short time. As a consequence, the positions involved are continually staffed by short-term inexperienced new entrants, with organisational memory not being well maintained.

For those who are highly committed to work, the flexi-internal labour market can facilitate improvement of the quality of those employees. Otherwise, it may foster withdrawal behaviour. This can include public managers and their subordinates tending to ignore poor working environments or detouring away from thorny management problems, because they find it easier to opt for a comfort zone in the form of looking for better positions in other agencies.

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## Concluding observations

While Taiwan's administrative reforms have been influenced by NPM and associated ideas of reinvention (Kuo, [2001](#); Tang, [2004](#)), the governmental system continues to have many unique features that have been impervious to experience elsewhere and have developed on their own. More specifically, the civil service as an integral component of the system has retained the lineage of the Chinese Mandarin system and diverges from reform trends in other contexts (Hwa, [2001](#); So, [2015](#)).

The flexi-internal labour market echoes the calls elsewhere for more flexibility in human resource management, but it is quite different from the model of managerial flexibility. Let managers manage or any equivalent has never been a notion of Taiwan's public personnel reforms. Instead, avoiding the abuse of power by public managers and political officers has been a dominant discourse of personnel reforms. This has been reinforced by the unique independent personnel authority, the Examination Yuan.

The model of employee-friendly flexibility is founded on the arrangement that, although public managers can flexibly recruit their staff from either the internal market or the external market, they cannot effectively manage or control the mobility of their staff. The mechanism in practice for mobility gives more favour to employees, rather than favouring top-down human resource management. This is attributable to the unique

In the flexi-internal labour market system, centralised and uniform personnel policies and practices are not an obstacle but rather a facilitator in helping to form a secondary quasi-free job market for government agencies and civil servants. Interestingly, while senior civil servants are typically more mobile in other developed contexts, middle-to-low level civil service employees are more mobile in Taiwan. This is due to the behaviour fostered by the incentives in the system, with different institutional designs having resulted in different behaviour.

Culture still matters in the sense of how people perceive and respond to the problems caused by the system. In response to the vexing problem of the internal brain drain of new entrants, some technical measures to suppress the free transfer of new entrants have been imposed instead of the system being fundamentally overhauled. Indeed, the personnel authority has never considered the system as a problem, and is actually aiming to amalgamate the professional groups in 2020 (reducing from them 96 to 57) partly in order to facilitate flexible transfers. This is consistent with some interviewees having suggested that a free transfer is part of their basic work rights. Some people (probably civil servants) openly advocated on an online platform of public policy participation in 2017 that the authority of public managers to approve transfers of their staff to other agencies should be removed.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, an analysis of Taiwan's civil service experience enriches an understanding of the theory and practice of a flexible internal labour market system. It can serve potentially as a valuable reference for administrative reforms and for comparisons in relation to other countries.

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## Disclosure statement

In this article



Interest was reported by the authors.





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## Notes

1. At the beginning of the Republic of China, the 9-grade ranking system fitted into three official ranks: grades 1 to 2 lay in the senior rank; grades 3 to 5 in the junior rank; and grades 6 to 9 in the elementary rank. During the early years of the Kuomintang rule in Taiwan, it remained a 9-grade system, but each rank contained three grades.
2. The data are divided into two sets: one is from the cohorts recruited from the general CSEEs in 2005–2010, and the other is from those recruited from the special examination for local governments in 2003–2010.
3. According to the authors' preliminary estimate, only 1% of vacancies available in the ILM are senior rank positions.
4. See the news at: [http://tcc9508.tcc.gov.tw/News\\_Content7.aspx?n=98AA49140128347C&sms=201E6BBD76D1B42E&s=C8C66901A28807A0](http://tcc9508.tcc.gov.tw/News_Content7.aspx?n=98AA49140128347C&sms=201E6BBD76D1B42E&s=C8C66901A28807A0).
5. For example, the voluntary turnover rates in the Federal government of the United States in recent years ranged from 5.4% in 2015 to 6.7% in 2017: see <https://www.fedsmith.com/2018/03/22/turnover-workers-quit-federal-government/>.
6. See the advocacy for removing the authority at: <https://join.gov.tw/idea/detail/37582e74-548f-4b82-89fa-8d95e6d61253/endorse?page=13&size=20&sort=updateDate, DESC>.

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