

Why GAO Did This Study

The Foreign Service promotion process shapes the face of U.S. diplomacy. State’s overarching goal is to make the promotion process fair, inclusive, and effective. However, a 2022 State survey found employees perceived a lack of fairness and objectivity in the promotion process.

The fiscal year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act includes a provision for GAO to conduct a comprehensive review of State’s promotion process. This report examines the extent to which State has (1) made changes to its promotion process since 2020 and documented its assessment of the usefulness of relevant leading practices and (2) followed its requirements for the composition of selection boards and ensured demographic diversity on these boards. GAO analyzed State data on the composition of employees from 2019 through 2023, reviewed State documents and a State-commissioned benchmark study on leading practices, and interviewed State officials. GAO also reviewed its nine leading practices on DEIA to identify the one that was relevant to State’s promotion process.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to State, including that it document the usefulness of the leading practices mentioned in the benchmark study for its reform initiative and consider how best to ensure that selection board member composition reflects the composition of the Foreign Service, including ethnicity and disability status. State agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-25-106956](#). For more information, contact Nagla’a El-Hodiri at (202) 512-7279 or elhodirin@gao.gov.

FOREIGN SERVICE PROMOTIONS

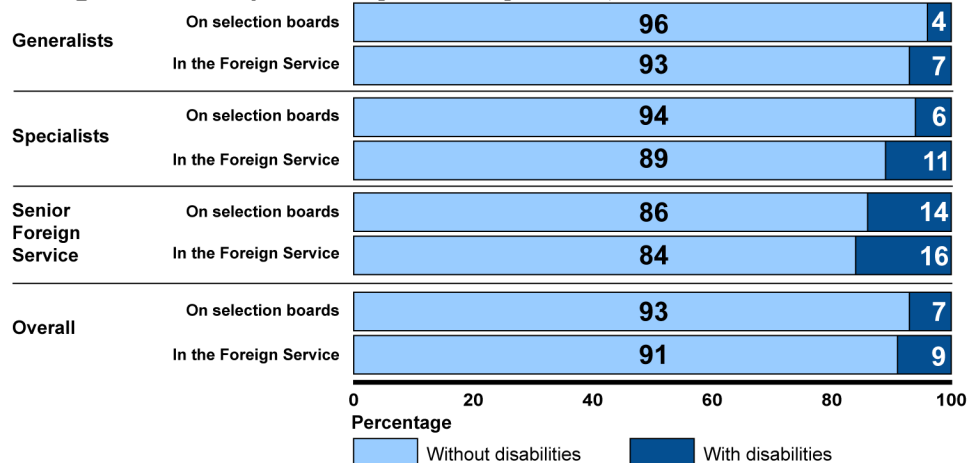
State Should Improve Documentation and Consider Expanding Demographic Representation on Selection Boards

What GAO Found

In 2020, the Department of State launched an initiative to transform the Foreign Service promotion process to be more fair, inclusive, and effective. State commissioned a 2021 benchmark study that identified four leading practices to help guide its reform but did not document its assessment of their usefulness. State made changes such as introducing a scoring rubric for promotion panels (known as selection boards) to rate and provide feedback to candidates. GAO found that this change and one other reflected three of the four leading practices identified in the study. State’s written assessment of the usefulness of the leading practices, as described in federal internal control standards, could increase employee confidence in the promotion process and provide transparency on the rationale for changes made.

State has generally followed but not fully documented its seven broad requirements for the composition of selection boards. For example, State officials told GAO they have met the requirement to “include a substantial number of women” by assigning at least one woman to each selection board. However, they have not documented this definition of the requirement because they said they need flexibility. In addition, State has not expanded the demographic criteria for selection boards to ensure they reflect the composition of the Foreign Service, including ethnicity and disability status, as suggested by a GAO leading practice on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA). From 2019 through 2023, selection boards generally included higher representation of women and historically disadvantaged racial groups, but lower representation of historically disadvantaged ethnic groups and people with disabilities, in comparison with the Foreign Service. By considering demographic representation across all selection boards, specifically for ethnicity and disability status, State would better position itself to include varied perspectives in assessing employees for promotion.

Composition of Foreign Service Selection Boards Compared with the Foreign Service Population by Disability Status, 2019–2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | [GAO-25-106956](#)

Note: Generalists implement U.S. foreign policy. Specialists support and maintain the functioning of overseas posts. Senior Foreign Service is the highest level of the Foreign Service.