

Numbers of rules and page counts in the *Federal Register*

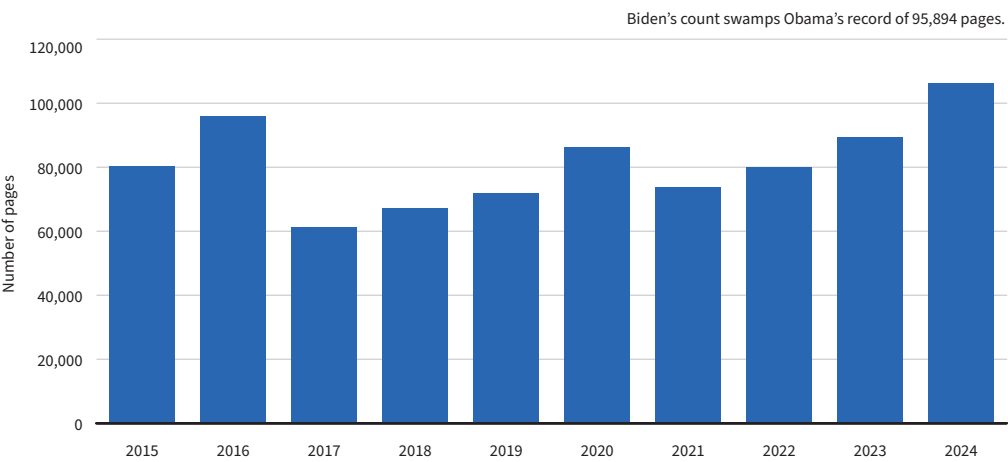
The *Federal Register* is the daily repository of all proposed and final federal rules and regulations. Although its page counts are often cited as a measure of regulatory activity, that is not a perfect measure. A short rule may be costly, whereas a lengthy one may be relatively cheap. The *Federal Register* also contains many administrative notices, corrections, rules relating to the governance of federal programs and budgets, presidential statements, and other materials. These contribute bulk and bear some relation to the flow of regulation but are not strictly regulations. Blank pages, skips, and corrections also affect page counts. Shortcomings notwithstanding, it remains worthwhile to

track the *Federal Register*'s page counts as a proxy for federal activism.

The 2024 *Federal Register* closed out at 106,109 pages, the highest count ever, and up 19 percent over 2023 (see Figure 8).⁸⁰ Counts are up 23 percent over the past 5 years, and 32 percent over the past 10 years.

One can compare Biden's *Federal Register* tally with two extremes. At the end of 2016, Obama's final calendar year, the number of pages reached a then-record 95,894. Conversely, the first calendar year of the Trump administration concluded with 61,314 pages.⁸¹

Figure 8. 106,109 *Federal Register* pages at end of Biden’s fourth year



Source: National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register.

The last time the annual page count had been lower than 2017 was in 1992 during the Bush administration, at 57,003 pages. A drop in page counts between administrations is typical, as incoming presidents freeze the pipeline temporarily and launch their own priorities. Figure 8, for example, depicts a substantial drop between Trump and Biden, even though over 6,000 pages between January 1, 2021, and Biden’s inauguration on January 20 belonged to Trump. (Similarly, Biden added 7,641 pages in January 2025 before Trump was inaugurated.⁸²)

Of the 20 all-time high *Federal Register* page counts, 7 occurred during the Obama administration, as Table 4 shows. Biden has 3 in the top 10. For the history of *Federal Register* page totals since 1936, see Appendix D.

Federal Register pages devoted to final rules

Isolating the pages devoted to final rules rather than gross page counts removes pages dedicated to proposed rules, agency notices, corrections, and presidential documents, although those can also have regulatory effects. Such counts tend to surge as presidential terms near their end and “midnight rules” are issued.

Biden’s fourth year concluded with 45,028 pages devoted to final rules, the highest on record and a 71 percent increase over 2023. Final-rule page bulk is up 40 percent over 5 years and 79 percent over 10 years (see Figure 9).

The previous record was 38,639 pages in 2016, Obama’s final year. By contrast,

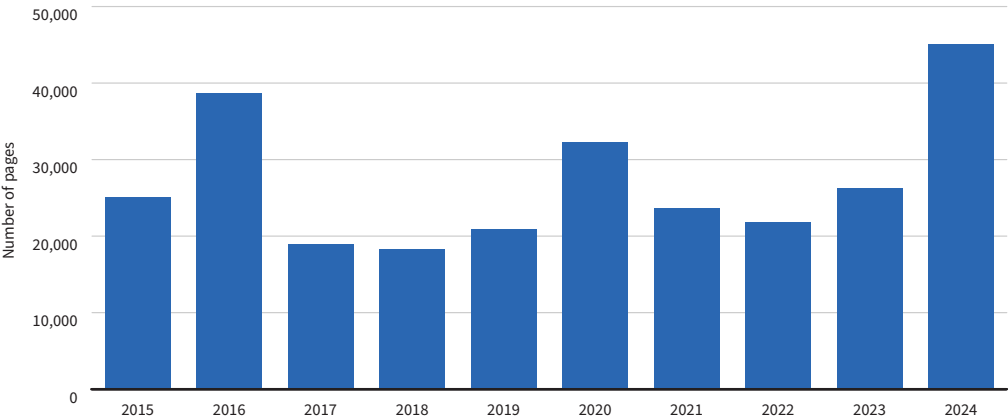
Table 4. Top 20 Federal Register page counts

Rank	Year	Count	POTUS	Rank	Year	Count	POTUS
1	2024	106,109	Biden	11	2012	78,961	Obama
2	2016	95,894	Obama	12	2014	77,687	Obama
3	2023	89,368	Biden	13	2004	75,675	Bush
4	2020	86,356	Trump	14	2002	75,606	Bush
5	2010	81,405	Obama	15	2006	74,937	Bush
6	2011	81,247	Obama	16	2000	74,258	Clinton
7	2015	80,260	Obama	17	2005	73,870	Bush
8	2022	79,856	Biden	18	2021	73,771	Biden
9	2008	79,435	Bush	19	1980	73,258	Carter
10	2013	79,311	Obama	20	2007	72,090	Bush

Source: Author tallies from National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register.

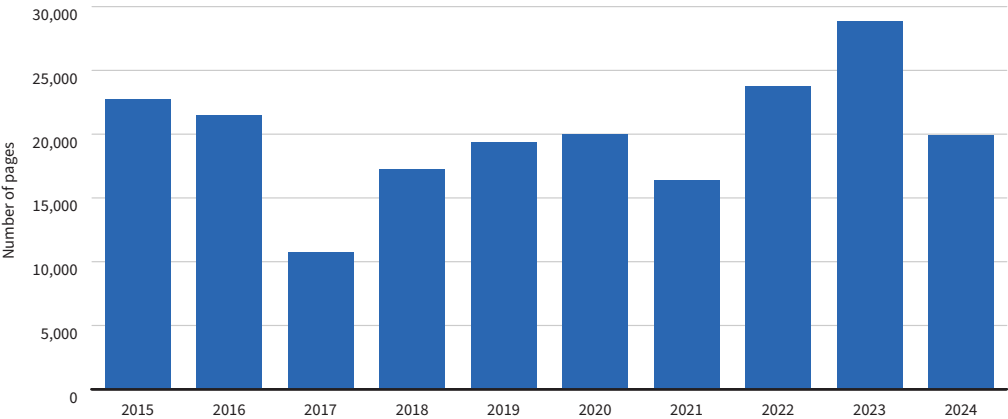
Note: Values sometimes fluctuate. POTUS = president of the United States.

Figure 9. Number of Federal Register pages devoted to final rules



Source: National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register.

Figure 10. Number of *Federal Register* pages devoted to proposed rules



Source: National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register.

2018’s 18,214 pages of final rules was the lowest count since 1993. Obviously, some rules are bulkier than others and affect tallies like these. Trump’s streamlining-oriented Safer Affordable Fuel-Efficient (SAFE) Vehicles Rule for model years 2021–2026, for example, clocked in at 1,105 pages.

Alongside these final-rule pages, the page counts for proposed rules in the regulatory pipeline are noteworthy given their implications for future regulatory costs. They are also a leading indicator for possible growth or decline in future final rules.

Federal Register pages devoted to proposed rules surged 21 percent between 2022 and 2023 to an all-time high of 28,892 (see Figure 10), even though, as we’ll see, Biden’s number of proposed rules is relatively low. Before Biden, the

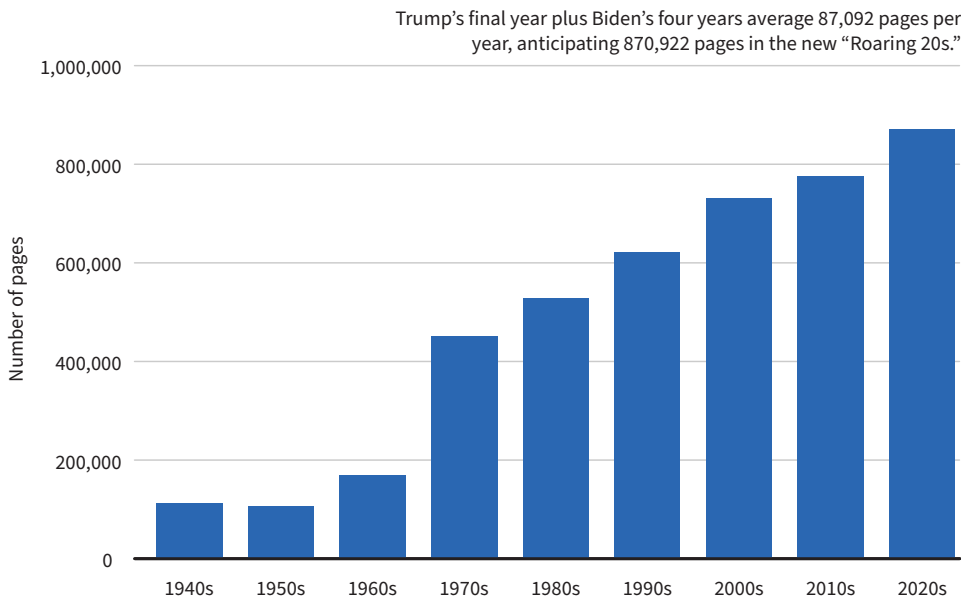
number of pages devoted to proposed rules peaked at 23,102 in 2011 under Obama. The 10,704 in 2017 under Trump was the lowest since 1981.

Federal Register pages published by decade

Calculating *Federal Register* pages per decade provides one more way to characterize the *Federal Register* and longer-term trends (see Figure 11). The results suggest that a million pages per decade may become normal.

During the 2010s, 775,734 pages were added to the *Federal Register* (a simple average of 77,573 pages each year). Five years into the 2020s, which includes Trump’s final calendar year and Biden’s four, the average is 87,092 annually. Figure 11’s extrapolation for the remainder of the 2020s shows an expected

Figure 11. *Federal Register* pages per decade



Source: National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register.

inventory of 870,922 pages, approaching twice the level of the 1970s, when over-regulation was a concern and liberalization in transportation and financial services occurred.

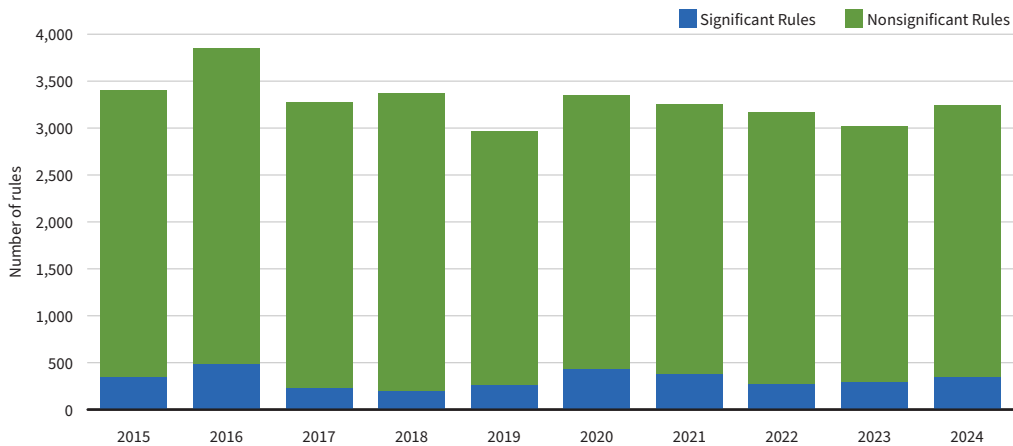
Federal Register final/ significant rules

A trend toward fewer but costlier larger rules may be underway, perhaps supplemented by guidance documents and subregulatory decrees that can substitute for formal rulemaking. The previous two editions of this report detail this “regulatory dark matter” phenomenon. For the year 2023, Biden could freely claim that he has the lowest final

rule count of any president apart from Trump. But that is not the same as being less of a regulator than his predecessors. As will his eventual progressive successors, Biden sported an affinity for antitrust, trade and tech interventions, family leave policies, and other pursuits that may not appear as rules in the *Federal Register* at all and that are not readily tracked in OMB rule reviews.

The 106,109-page *Federal Register* contained 3,248 final rules in 2024, an 8 percent increase over 3,018 final rules in 2023. Biden’s 2023 count is the lowest on record apart from Trump’s 2,964 in 2019 (see Figure 12), which stands as the only count below 3,000 since recordkeeping

Figure 12. Number of final and significant final rules in the *Federal Register*



Source: Compiled by the author using the National Archives. Current-year total final rule tally and all years' significant rule tallies from [FederalRegister.gov](https://www.federalregister.gov) online database, which fluctuates. Prior years' total final rules come from National Archives compilations maintained under "Federal Register Statistics" at <https://www.federalregister.gov/reader-aids/understanding-the-federal-register>.

began in the 1970s. In 2016, the final full year of the Obama administration, the number of final rules reached 3,853, the highest count since 2005. The average for the prior decade (2000–2009) was 3,945. Rule counts were routinely higher in the past: Before 2005, rule counts exceeded 4,000 for all years. The annual average in the 1990s was 4,596, and even higher in the decades prior. Final rule counts now stand well below these levels. The seeming paradox of fewer rules but a fatter *Federal Register* may be explained in part by rules getting longer or more detailed, proposed rules in particular, as may be observed in Appendix E.

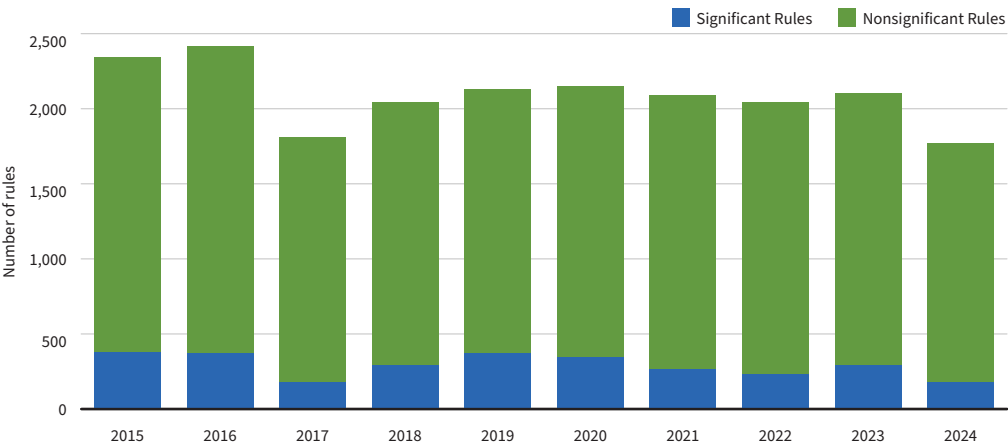
The subset of the total final rules deemed significant under EO 12866 is also presented in Figure 12. Biden had 342

significant final rules in 2023, a jump of 18 percent from 289 in 2023. Biden's significant rules clearly exceed those of Trump; however, they did not resume Obama-era levels, when significant rules topped 400 three times, including the peak of 486 in 2016. (See Appendix E for earlier years.)

In recognition that overlap occurs in transition years, here are calendar-year breakdowns of final and significant final rules published in *the Federal Register* during recent administrations:

- ▶ Barack Obama (eight years): 3,037 significant rules, average 380 per year
- ▶ Donald Trump (four years): 1,121 significant rules, average 280 per year (some deregulatory)

Figure 13. Number of proposed and significant proposed rules in the *Federal Register*



Source: Compiled by the author using the National Archives.

► Joe Biden (four years): 1,274 significant rules, average 319 per year

Box 1 in a later section will inventory the costliest tier of these significant rules for 2024.

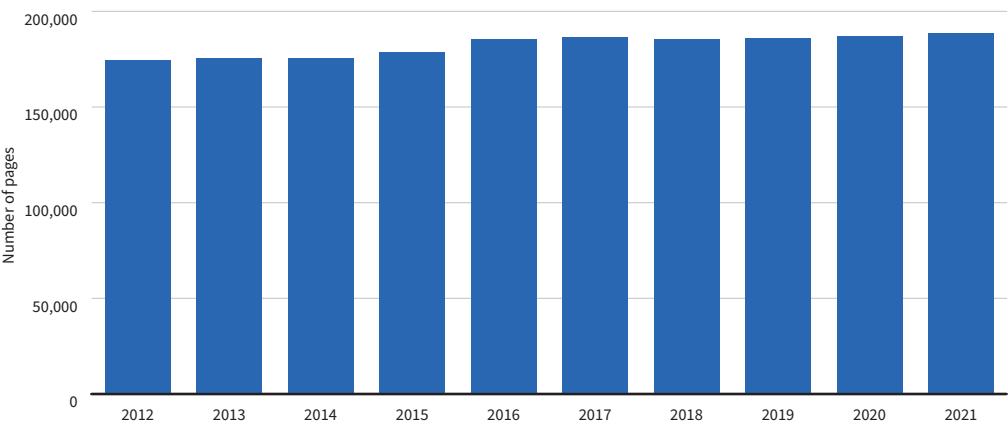
Cumulative final rules in the *Federal Register*

The annual outflow of over 3,000 final rules (except for Trump’s 2,964 rules in 2019) has resulted in 123,723 total new rules since 1993, when the first edition of *Ten Thousand Commandments* was published, through the end of 2024. Since 1976, when the *Federal Register* first began itemizing rules, 220,813 final rules have been issued. Since 1996, the year

the Congressional Review Act (CRA) was passed, 104,837 rules have been issued. (See again Appendix E.) Fewer than two dozen CRA resolutions of disapproval have succeeded.

Proposed rules also sit at historic lows, as Biden’s overall proposed rule flows never attained pre-Trump levels. In fact, the 1,769 proposed rules in the record-breaking 2024 *Federal Register* are actually an all-time low, though 175 were deemed significant (see Figure 13). Trump’s first-year tally of 1,809 proposed rules is notable as the previous all-time low, despite including over 150 issued by Obama during the first weeks of 2017. As observable in Appendix E, the average in the 1990s was 3,164 per

Figure 14. *Code of Federal Regulations*



Source: National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register.

year. The average from 2000 to 2010 was 2,662 annually.

The expanding Code of Federal Regulations

The page count in the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR)—where the *Federal Register’s* rules come to rest in small print in bound volumes of magenta, teal, and fuchsia—is not as dramatic as the yearly count of tens of thousands of pages in the *Federal Register*. It is still a sight to behold.

In 1960, the CFR contained 22,877 pages. By 1975, that count (including the CFR’s index) had surged to 71,224. As of year-end 2021 (2022–2024 figures have not been logged yet at the National Archives), the count stood at 188,343, as seen in

Figure 14. That is a 164 percent increase in the CFR since 1975. In 2008, George W. Bush’s final full year in office, the count stood at 157,974.

The number of CFR bound volumes now stands at 243, compared with 133 in 1975. The expansion since George W. Bush, not including Biden’s recent two years, is 9 percent. (Appendix F has a detailed breakdown of numbers of pages and volumes in the CFR since 1975.)

The CFR archives agency rulemakings, just as the *United States Code* does for statutes. But it does not account for executive actions and subregulatory guidance documents. These have no fixed archive since the revocation of Trump’s 2020 EO 13981, “Promoting the Rule of Law Through Improved Agency Guidance Documents.”