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Who Wants to Work for the Government?

In an era when everyone wants to be a millionaire, governments struggle to attract and retain highly qualified employees, making it more important than ever to understand what attracts people to the public service. Using contingency table analysis and logistic regression on the 1989 and 1998 General Social Surveys, we explore how individuals' demographic characteristics and the importance they place on various job qualities influence their preference for and employment in the public sector. Job security may still be the strongest attraction of government jobs, but high income and the opportunity to be useful to society also attract some Americans to the public service. Minorities, veterans, Democrats, and older Americans preferred public-sector jobs more than whites, nonveterans, Republicans, and younger Americans, who were otherwise similar. Women and college graduates were more likely than comparable men and less-educated respondents to have government jobs, but no more likely to prefer them. Overall, desire for government jobs declined markedly between 1989 and 1998.

Will governments be able to attract the workers they need in the early twenty-first century? For the past two decades, observers have warned of a "quiet crisis" of steadily deteriorating "quality, morale, and effectiveness of the federal civil service" (Levine 1986, 200), "ubiquitous anomie" throughout the federal service (Wildavsky 1988, 753), and "serious morale problems [as] a tragic and endemic hallmark of the federal service" (National Commission on the Public Service 1989, 91, ix). Despite apparent morale problems, there is little systematic evidence of either declining quality or rising turnover in the public service (Crewson 1995; Lewis 1991), but that may be partly because governments have had only a limited need to hire replacement workers, due to downsizing and pension plans that tie baby boomers to their federal jobs (Ippolito 1987). As the huge wave of baby boomer retirements swells, governments may face increasing difficulty finding enough of the workers they want—especially young college graduates of diverse races with the kinds of motivation and skills that governments desire (Light 1999, 128–29).

This impending wave of hiring increases the need to investigate what kinds of people are attracted to government jobs and what characteristics make those jobs appealing. In this article, we analyze the 1989 and 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine how people's demographic characteristics and the importance they place

on various job attributes affect both whether they currently work for government and whether they prefer to work for private business or government. Most previous studies of public–private differences compare the attitudes of current public- and private-sector employees (typically with nonrandom samples), but becoming a public-sector employee involves both choice and chance. Matching an applicant with a job requires the government's willingness to offer a job and the individual's willingness to accept it. Comparing people who *prefer* to work for government or for the private sector may offer new insights into sectoral differences.

In the first section, we develop a model of choice between public- and private-sector jobs, reviewing arguments

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about what types of people should be attracted to government careers. After describing the GSS data, we then test those hypotheses using cross-tabulations and logistic regression. In particular, we look at the impact of demographic factors (race, sex, veteran status, age, and education) and the impact of the importance respondents place on high income, job security, and opportunities for public service. We then discuss possible implications of our findings.

A Model of Sectoral Choice

Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings (1964, 23–24) find that job seekers typically rate financial rewards; job security; worthwhile, useful, interesting, and challenging work; opportunities for advancement; and good working conditions as the most important considerations in choosing a job. In searching the job market for these qualities, “people usually perceive occupations and employing organizations, not precisely and realistically, but in terms of vaguely generalized cultural pre-judgments” (Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings 1964, 7). Therefore, individual preferences for government or business jobs reflect not only their own job priorities, but their perceptions of which sector will better satisfy their needs. The relationship between the importance people place on various job attributes and their preference for public- or private-sector jobs should indicate which priorities lead to a predisposition to public employment and what stereotypes Americans have about jobs in the two sectors.

Pay

Although economists typically assume that pay is the key factor in workers’ job choices, many public administration scholars argue that money matters less, and nonpecuniary benefits matter more, to public- than to private-sector employees (Crewson 1997; Karl and Sutton 1998; Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings 1964; Perry and Porter 1982; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991). Implicit in the public administration literature is the belief that government pays less than the private sector, a view shared by federal employees¹ but largely rejected by the general public.² Although U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys indicate that federal pay is over 25 percent lower than private-sector pay for *similar jobs*, economists typically find that *similar workers* (those of the same race and sex with the same levels of education and experience) earn much more in the federal than in the private sector, though evidence on state and local government pay is mixed (see Langbein and Lewis 1998 for a review of the research). Thus, both economists and public administration scholars expect those who place the highest priority on pay to be driven toward the higher-paying sector, but they probably disagree as to which sector that is.

Job Security

Government careers are generally more stable than those in the private sector. Civil service protections make dismissals more difficult in government than in non-unionized private firms, and layoffs are uncommon, since government agencies downsize less frequently than private firms and almost never die. Several studies have found that government jobs are especially attractive to security-seeking employees (Baldwin 1991; Bellante and Link 1981; Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings 1964), but Newstrom, Reif, and Monckza (1976) find that private-sector employees actually value job security *more* than public servants, and Rainey (1982) and Karl and Sutton (1998) find no significant difference between the two sectors in the importance of job security.

Attitudes toward Public Service

People’s preferences for government or business jobs should reflect their attitudes toward the two sectors. McFalls and Gallagher (1975) argue that people are attracted to the sector that is most compatible with their political beliefs; because Democrats are more likely than Republicans to favor an activist government, they should also be more likely to choose public-service careers. Perry and Wise (1990, 370) argue that “the greater an individual’s public service motivation, the more likely the individual will seek membership in a public organization.” This hypothesis has found some empirical support (Crewson 1995, 1997; Rainey 1982; Warner et al. 1963), but also some counterevidence (Gabris and Simo 1995). Although government offers many opportunities to perform meaningful public service (Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings 1964; Perry 1996; Rainey 1982), the non-profit sector does so as well, and the growing emphasis on customer service in business makes clear that all sectors offer opportunities to help others.

Job Opportunities, Demographic Factors, and Sector Preferences

Occupational choices, location, and era all influence one’s likelihood of working for government. Almost all soldiers, firefighters, police officers, and schoolteachers, for instance, work for government. People living in Washington, DC, or a state capitol will be more likely to find government jobs than those who live in small towns. Those who started their careers in the 1960s were much more likely to find federal jobs than those who entered the labor market in the 1990s. Availability of jobs probably also affects their attractiveness—if one’s friends and relatives are finding government jobs, one is more likely to hear positive things about those jobs. The following demographic characteristics may influence access to and desire for government jobs.

Education. Today's government requires a highly educated workforce. Many occupations requiring college educations are concentrated in the public sector (such as teachers). Based on analysis of the 1979 Current Population Survey, Blank (1985) finds that the probability of government employment rises markedly with education.

Race, Sex, and Veteran Status. Although women and minorities still earn less than comparably educated and experienced white males in the federal service (Lewis 1998), the white male pay advantage is smaller in government than in the private sector (Asher and Popkin 1984; Perloff and Wachter 1984; Smith 1977). In addition, governments have older and better-enforced bans on discrimination against women and minorities, and many grant veterans preferential treatment in hiring and promotions. Blank (1985) finds that members of "protected" groups (minorities, women, and veterans) are more likely to work for the government than whites, males, and nonveterans with similar characteristics.

Personal Contacts. "Having the right contact in the right place at the right time" is of "paramount importance in connecting people with jobs" (Granovetter 1974, viii, 22). Social networks of coworkers, friends, and relatives transmit important labor market information, not just about the availability of jobs, but about working conditions, organizational climate, bosses, and employees (Granovetter 1995). In a survey of federal employees hired during fiscal year 1997, 33 percent had learned about their current job from friends and relatives (MSPB 2000, 7).

Birth Cohort. The availability of government jobs and societal attitudes toward public employment are likely to influence preferences for public- and private-sector jobs. Young people should be less likely to hold federal jobs (because the disproportionate number of baby boomers in federal service limits openings for younger workers) and to want them (because they grew up in an era when bureaucrat bashing and cynical attitudes toward government prevailed.)

Summary

In short, we expect people to prefer to work for the sector they think will provide them with more of the rewards they consider most important. Those who place great value on job security and service to the public should be more likely to choose government jobs, while those who place a higher priority on pay should prefer whichever sector they think will pay them the most. Better-educated individuals should find more opportunities to do the kind of work they want in the public sector. Women, minorities, and veterans should expect higher pay advantages to government jobs than comparably educated and experienced white men. Individuals with close contacts in government should be more likely to prefer and find public-sector jobs, while younger people should be less likely to do either.

Data and Methods

In 1989 and 1998, the General Social Survey (GSS)—a highly respected series of surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago—asked respondents, "Suppose you were working and could choose between different kinds of jobs. Which of the following would you personally choose: Working in a private business or working for the government or civil service?"³ (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 1999, 869). Of the 2,609 respondents who answered this question, 62 percent favored a job in private business, 24 percent preferred working for the government, and 14 percent said they could not choose between them. We coded those 24 percent as 1 on our key dependent variable, "Prefers to work for government," and the others as 0. Of course, this does not mean they were seeking a government job (indeed, one-quarter of the respondents were retired or not working outside the home) or that they would take one if it was offered, but it does indicate a predisposition to public employment.

We created a second dummy dependent variable ("Works for government"), based on respondents' current or most recent three-digit standard industrial classification code. Because the GSS does not explicitly ask whether respondents work for the government, we used three definitions of government service. Definition 1 included only the 6.4 percent classified as working in public administration; Definition 2 added the 8.5 percent classified in education; and Definition 3 also added the 1.6 percent employed in bus service, U.S. Postal Service, water supply, irrigation, or sanitary services.⁴ Under the broadest definition, 16.4 percent of the respondents were classified as government employees; this was many fewer than indicated a preference for public employment, but it may reflect flaws in measurement.

We expected a variety of job values and demographic characteristics to influence both the preference for and possession of government jobs. The GSS asked a set of questions about the importance of various job attributes: "On the following list there are various aspects of jobs. Please circle one number to show how important you personally consider it is in a job: Job security? High income? Good opportunities for advancement? An interesting job? A job that allows someone to work independently? A job that allows someone to help other people? A job that is useful to society? A job with flexible working hours?" (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 1999, 863–66). Respondents rated each attribute on a scale from 1 ("not at all important") to 5 ("very important"). Because helping others and being useful to society both approximate one concept of public-service motivation, we created this measure by averaging the answers to those two questions. Otherwise, we treated each job attribute separately. We expected individuals who place greater value on job security and public ser-

vice to be more likely to desire and hold government jobs, but we had less clear expectations for those who rate high income as very important. We made no predictions about the effects of the other job values; indeed, though we included them in initial runs of our models, we dropped them from the final models when none proved useful.

We also included a number of demographic characteristics as independent variables. Because a disproportionate share of jobs requiring college degrees are in government, we expected a positive coefficient on *Years of Education*. Because of better treatment in the public sector, we expected positive coefficients for *Females* (coded 1 for women and 0 for men), *Minorities* (coded 1 for racial/ethnic minorities and 0 for nonminorities), and *Veterans* (coded 1 for known veterans⁵ and 0 otherwise). Because we expected that having a close relative who works for government would provide both information about job opportunities and positive impressions of government jobs, we expected a positive coefficient on *Parent in Government* (coded 1 for those whose father or mother had a government-related industrial classification). Because Democrats were expected to have a more positive attitude toward participating in an expansive, activist government, we expected a positive coefficient on the dummy variable Democrat. We measured age as *Year of Birth* (0 represented 1900), expecting that when they entered the labor market and were socialized into their beliefs about government jobs (rather than their chronological age) affected both the accessibility and desirability of government jobs. We expected a negative coefficient, indicating that younger people (those with later birth years) find government jobs less desirable than their elders do. A negative coefficient on the dummy variable *Year 1998* (coded 1 for 1998 respondents) would show that comparable respondents were less likely to want or have government jobs in 1998 than nine years previously.

Findings

Table 1 presents cross-tabulations of our dependent variables with each of our independent variables, most of them simplified to make presentation clearer. For each subgroup, we present the percentage of respondents who preferred public-sector jobs and the percentage who actually worked in government under our broadest definition (Definition 3). We also report a gamma statistic for each cross-tabulation; the higher the absolute value of gamma, the stronger the relationship. The statistical significance of gamma indicates whether we can be confident that the variables are related in the U.S. population. Table 2 presents logit analyses for each of our dependent variables. The coefficients represent the change in the log-odds of choosing government jobs from a one-unit increase in the independent vari-

ables, holding constant the other variables in the model. More generally, positive coefficients show that probabilities rose with increases in the independent variables after accounting for the effects of the other variables.

Pay

Contrary to our perception that the private sector pays better than government, we found that the more strongly respondents valued high income, the more likely they were to *prefer* government employment. Overall, 32 percent of those who said that high income was “very important,” 23 percent of those who called it “important,” and only 19 percent of those who rated it less important preferred civil service over private business jobs (table 1). Gamma was .21 (showing that a preference for government employment rises with the importance one places on high income) and was significant at the .001 level. The relationship remained positive in the logit analysis,⁶ holding constant the demographic characteristics and other job values, but was barely significant at the .10 level (table 2). From the outside looking in, Americans appear to perceive that government jobs pay well.

On the other hand, those who place more importance on high income were less likely to *actually* work for government (only 12 percent of those who considered it very important worked for government, compared to 19 percent of those who did not consider it important), suggesting that government salaries do not hold workers who place special emphasis on high pay. Under Definition 1 (which classified respondents as government employees only if they worked in public administration), the coefficient on *High Income* was negative but not statistically significant. Under Definition 2 (which included respondents who worked in education), the negative coefficient increased in absolute value and statistical significance, suggesting that teachers place even less value on high income than those in public administration. Under Definition 3 (which added bus service, U.S. Postal Service, water supply, irrigation, and sanitary services), the coefficient changed only trivially, suggesting these workers also place lower value on high income.

Job Security

Consistent with most previous research, those who strongly valued job security were more likely to want to work for government—29 percent of those who called job security “very important” preferred a civil service job, compared to 18 percent of those who rated it “important” and 15 percent of those who rated it less important—and the gamma of .30 was highly significant. Yet, a desire for job security was not related to actually working for government in the contingency table. According to the logit analy-

Table 1 Percentage Who Want to Work for Government versus Currently Work for Government

Variable name	Want to work for government	Currently work for government	Minimum sample size
Total	24	16	2,516
High income			
Not important/neither ¹	19	19	444
Important	23	17	1,405
Very important	32	12	570
gamma	.21***	-.15**	
Job Security			
Not important/neither ¹	15	18	142
Important	18	16	927
Very important	29	17	1,374
gamma	.30***	.00	
Public-Service Motivation			
Not important/neither ¹	23	13	680
Important	24	17	1,212
Very important	29	19	518
gamma	.09*	.14**	
Political Party			
Republican	18	19	758
Independent	20	15	854
Democrat	33	16	895
gamma	.27***	-.05	
Education Level			
Less than high school diploma	28	9	478
High school graduate	27	12	802
Some college	22	15	647
Bachelor's degree and above	18	31	580
gamma	-.15***	.39***	
Gender			
Male	22	16	1,094
Female	25	17	1,422
gamma	.09*	.03	
Minority Status			
Nonminority	21	16	2,106
Minority	38	17	410
gamma	.38***	.01	
Veteran's Status			
Nonveteran/unknown	23	16	2,365
Veteran	34	29	151
gamma	.25**	.38***	
Parent in Government			
No	24	15	2,123
Yes	21	22	393
gamma	-.09	.22**	
Year of Birth			
1910-19	32	16	205
1920-29	31	19	274
1930-39	29	21	273
1940-49	24	18	429
1950-59	22	18	523
1960-69	19	12	543
1970-79	18	13	206
gamma	-.17***	-.12***	
Survey Year			
1989	28	16	1,362
1998	19	16	1,154
gamma	.21	.00	

¹"Not important/neither" category is a combination of three answer choices: not at all important, not important, and neither important nor unimportant.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Source: General Social Survey data from 1989 and 1998.

Table 2 Logit Models for Full Sample (asymptotic z-statistics in parentheses)

	Prefers to work for government	Works for government		
		Definition 1	Definition 2	Definition 3
Importance of high income	.120 (1.67)	-.136 (-1.12)	-.251** (-2.88)	-.224** (-2.71)
Importance of job security	.360*** (4.12)	.223 (1.56)	.186 (1.87)	.183 (1.93)
Public-service motivation	.148* (2.14)	.089 (.74)	.173 (1.95)	.193* (2.30)
Democrat	.450*** (4.38)	-.372 (-1.91)	-.131 (-.99)	-.072 (-.57)
Education	-.028 (-1.57)	.052 (1.68)	.269*** (11.41)	.232*** (10.49)
Female	.096 (.91)	-.297 (-1.62)	.449** (3.31)	.283* (2.23)
Minority	.782*** (6.20)	.273 (1.11)	.355* (2.04)	.412* (2.52)
Veteran	.401 (1.93)	1.115*** (3.90)	1.049*** (4.43)	.926*** (4.08)
Parent in government	.049 (.34)	.568** (2.68)	.325* (2.08)	.305* (2.02)
Year of birth	-.009*** (-3.17)	-.013* (-2.49)	-.018*** (-4.64)	-.019*** (-5.04)
Year 1998	-.396*** (-3.70)	.284 (1.47)	.061 (.46)	.078 (.62)
Sample size	2,459	2,364	2,364	2,364
Pseudo R ²	.06	.04	.10	.08

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Source: General Social Survey data from 1989 and 1998.

ses, however, *comparable* individuals with a stronger desire for job security were significantly more likely to prefer government jobs and were probably more likely to possess them, though the effect fell short of statistical significance under all three definitions of working for government.

Attitudes toward Public Service

Those who placed a higher priority on helping others and being useful to society were slightly more likely to choose government service, though the impact was weaker than the literature might suggest. About 29 percent of those at the highest level of public-service motivation preferred government jobs, compared to about 24 percent of those who rated it as less important. The gamma of .09 was significant at the .05 level, but weaker than the relationships between preference for government service and the importance of either high income or job security. Public-service motivation appeared to have a somewhat greater impact on actually holding a government job—the gamma of .14 was significant at the .01 level. In the preference logit, after controlling for the other variables, the public-service motivation coefficient was still positive and significant; it was somewhat stronger than that for high income but weaker than that for job security. This coefficient was positive but statistically insignificant in the works-for-government logit

that only included public administration. Adding teachers and other government employees to the definition substantially increased the coefficient and pushed it into statistical significance. Thus, the desire to help others and be useful to society appears to attract people to teaching and other government jobs more than to public administration.

Those whose party affiliation suggested pro-government attitudes were more likely than others to prefer but not to have government jobs. Much higher percentages of Democrats (33 percent) than of independents (20 percent) and Republicans (18 percent) preferred civil service jobs. The gamma of .27 was highly significant and nearly as strong as that for job security. Democrats were also significantly more likely than *comparable* non-Democrats to prefer government work in the logit analysis, with the effect again about as strong as that for job security. Party affiliation was not significantly related to actually having a government job, though both tables suggest that Democrats were less likely than Republicans to work for government.

Job Opportunities and Demographic Characteristics

As expected, better-educated Americans were more likely than others to work for government—largely because most teaching jobs are in the public sector⁷—but they appeared less likely than others to prefer government jobs. Although 27 percent of the respondents with a high school diploma or less wanted to work for government, only 18 percent of college graduates did so, even though college graduates were three times as likely as those without college to be classified as working for government. Indeed, college graduates were the only group who were more likely to hold than to prefer government employment—13 percentage points fewer of them preferred than held public-sector jobs. That relationship largely disappeared once demographic and attitudinal variables were controlled; the education coefficient was not statistically significant in the preference logit. The relationship between education and actually working for government was positive, strong, and highly significant, however, in both the cross-tabulations and the logit analysis (once teachers were included in the public employee definition).

In line with Blank (1985), “protected groups” (women, minorities, and veterans) appeared more likely than others to choose public employment. Overall, women were slightly more likely than men to prefer government jobs (the gamma of .09 was significant at the .05 level), but this gender gap essentially disappeared once the other demographic and attitudinal variables were controlled (that is, women were no more likely than *comparable* men to desire government jobs). In terms of actual employment, women were no more likely than men to hold government jobs (table 1) and no more likely than *comparable* men to

hold “public administration” jobs (table 2, Definition 1). Women were, however, significantly more likely than *comparable* men to hold government jobs once teachers were recognized as public employees (table 2, Definition 2).

Minorities were nearly twice as likely as whites to want government jobs (38 compared to 21 percent), although they were no more likely to have them. They were also substantially and significantly more likely than *comparable* whites both to desire and to have government jobs, after controlling for other variables. Again, it required including teachers as public employees to make the *Minority* coefficient statistically significant and adding other government jobs made the effect stronger. Differences between minorities and nonminorities remained larger for preferences than for actual government employment.

Veterans were substantially more likely than nonveterans to want and to hold government jobs, with the difference larger for possession than preference. In the logit analysis, the veteran/nonveteran difference in desire among comparable employees fell just short of statistical significance, but the difference in actual employment was highly significant (under all three definitions).

People who had a parent working for government were more likely than others to have government jobs but not to prefer civil service. That pattern persisted after controlling for the other variables, but the effect was strongest for the “public administration” definition of government service. The stronger impact on having than on desiring a government job suggests that parents provide more connections than positive impressions of government service.

Younger people were less likely both to want and to have government jobs. Nearly one-third of those born before 1940 preferred public-sector jobs, but less than one-fifth of those born since 1960 did so.⁸ In addition, 18 percent of those born before 1940 actually worked for government, compared to only 12 percent of those born since 1960. Even with the full set of control variables, year of birth had a clearly significant negative relationship with both the desire for and possession of a government job. As each succeeding birth cohort has even less preference for public employment than the preceding one, the desire to work for government is likely to continue declining. The one hopeful sign here is that the year of birth coefficient is twice as strong in the employment as in the preference logit, suggesting that when baby boomers retire and demand for public employees grows, desire for government jobs may also rise.

The percentage of respondents who preferred government employment dropped by one-third (from 28 to 19 percent) between 1989 and 1998, and the trend remained strong even after controlling for the effects of birth cohort, rising education, and other characteristics. Actually holding government jobs did not change significantly between

1989 and 1998, however. The decline in preference for government jobs might merely reflect the stronger state of the economy in 1998, but the clear decline in preference for public employment with each birth cohort suggests that trend is likely to continue.

College Graduates and Respondents under 30

Government recruitment targets college graduates and young people. Therefore, we analyzed college graduates separately from non-graduates, and respondents under 30 separately from those over 30, to determine whether motivators differed between these targeted groups and the remainder of the population. We repeated the logit analyses of the last section on each of the subgroups. We also repeated the analyses on the full group but included a dummy variable coded 1 for college graduates (or for those under 30) plus a full set of interaction terms between the dummy variable and all the other independent variables. The interaction terms allowed us to test whether the impact of the independent variables differed significantly between graduates and non-graduates or between people under and over 30.

In terms of actually working for government, several factors had significantly different impacts on graduates and non-graduates⁹ (table 3). College-educated women were much more likely than comparable men to work for government (largely due to teachers), but gender did not appear to influence public employment among non-graduates. A positive attitude toward government had a stronger impact on working for government among the college educated—public-service motivation had a positive impact on government employment for college graduates but no apparent effect for non-graduates, and Democratic party affiliation had a negative impact on public employment for those without college degrees but no apparent impact for college graduates. Each additional year of education also drove college graduates more strongly than non-graduates toward public service.

It was far less clear that these variables influenced *preference* for public-sector employment differently for college graduates than for others, or either preferences or actual employment differently for those over than for under 30. Although some coefficients suggested different patterns for college graduates than for non-graduates, a chi-square test on the full set of interaction terms could not reject the null hypothesis

that all population coefficients were identical for college graduates and non-graduates. Similarly, chi-square tests could not reject the null hypothesis that all factors had identical influences on both preference and employment for respondents over and under 30. In short, the preference of college graduates and those under 30 does not appear systematically different from those for the entire group. On the other hand, public-service motivation and Democratic party affiliation appeared to affect the actual employment status of college graduates more than those without college diplomas; emphasizing that service aspect of government employment may attract professionals and managers more than other workers.

Conclusion

Our findings confirm that governments face an enormous challenge in attracting the best and brightest of the younger generation into public service. The public sector cannot recruit from as large a pool of Americans who *prefer* government jobs as even one decade ago, and the pool seems to be shrinking with each succeeding cohort. The problem of drawing college graduates into government may already be surfacing among new public employees. The Merit Systems Protection Board (2000, 4–

Table 3 Logit Models for College Graduates and Others (asymptotic z-statistics in parentheses)

	Prefers to work for government		Works for government		Under 30	
	Graduates	Non-grads	Graduates	Non-grads	Prefers to work for government	Works for government
Importance of high income	-.047 (-.28)	.177* (2.22)	-.275 (-1.86)	-.184 (-1.78)	-.046 (-.31)	-.444* (-2.26)
Importance of job security	.470* (2.41)	.318** (3.24)	.169 (1.07)	.221 (1.79)	.012 (.07)	-.377 (-1.63)
Public-service motivation	.318 (1.82)	.108 (1.43)	.402** (2.66)	.042 (.41)	.096 (.61)	.589* (2.38)
Democrat	.657** (2.73)	.392** (3.42)	.183 (.85)	-.320* (-1.96)	.348 (1.46)	.083 (.24)
Education	-.048 (-.53)	-.002 (-.08)	.342*** (4.62)	.125** (3.06)	-.023 (-.46)	.269*** (3.77)
Female	.534* (2.11)	-.038 (-.32)	.889*** (4.06)	-.030 (-.19)	.219 (.95)	.059 (.18)
Minority	.889** (2.91)	.768*** (5.51)	.640* (2.13)	.369 (1.82)	.833** (3.39)	.401 (1.06)
Veteran	.444 (.89)	.366 (1.59)	.626 (1.42)	1.076*** (4.05)	.978 (1.88)	2.139** (3.38)
Parent works for government	.145 (.55)	.004 (.02)	.072 (.31)	.494* (2.43)	.207 (.75)	.414 (1.21)
Year of birth	-.006 (-.62)	-.012*** (-3.57)	-.023** (-2.97)	-.018*** (-4.03)	-.024 (-.70)	-.078 (-1.42)
Year 1998	-.660** (-2.66)	-.330** (-2.77)	-.357 (-1.68)	.330* (2.03)	-.243 (-.63)	.875 (1.45)
Sample size	563	1,896	558	1,806	523	476
Pseudo R ²	.09	.06	.11	.04	.04	.17

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Source: General Social Survey data from 1989 and 1998.

5) finds declining educational levels among federal new hires—only 40 percent had four-year college degrees in FY 1998, down from 50 percent in FY 1994. A decade ago, when government downsizing, hiring freezes, and low turnover rates put a significant damper on hiring, dips in the quality of new hires had far less serious implications for the federal service. Today, with nearly 40 percent of the federal civil service born during the first 10 years after World War II and fast approaching retirement, hiring needs are likely to escalate.

Where can governments turn for replacements? No one is suggesting that governments should recruit only among those who prefer public service. Many people take government jobs by chance, whether they would ideally prefer to work in the private or the public sector, and preference as we measure it may not markedly affect the jobs people actually take. Still, recruiting that targets people who are favorably predisposed to government service should yield greater success.

Minorities and women will comprise a growing share of the American workforce in the twenty-first century, and they tend to view government jobs more positively than whites and men do. Current figures show that African American and Hispanic shares of federal new hires increased from 16 percent to 19 percent and from 6 percent to 9 percent, respectively, between FY 1994 and FY 1998 (MSPB 2000, 5). These trends are likely to continue, and the percentage of government jobs held by white males should drop steadily over the next decade or more.

Job security is still a major selling point of public sector employment. GSS respondents gave job security the highest priority among the job aspects asked about: In 1998, 57 percent called it “very important” and another 37 percent considered it “important.” Those calling it “very important” were one-third more likely to prefer government jobs than comparable workers who only labeled it “important.” Government recruiters need to find creative ways to leverage this advantage.

Recruitment should also benefit from the perception, at least among the less educated,¹⁰ that government jobs pay better than private-sector jobs. People who consider high income to be especially important are somewhat more likely to prefer government jobs, even though they are less likely to hold them. This suggests that concerns about pay are not keeping people from considering government jobs, though they may prevent them from taking or retaining them. The perception that government pays as well or better than the private sector should bring applicants through the door and allow recruiters to tout the other benefits of government employment (such as job security, important and interesting work).

A desire to help others and to be useful to society had a significant positive impact on both preference for and possession of government jobs. The effect of public-service motivation on actual government employment was stronger for college graduates than for others and stronger for teaching and other government jobs than for public administration positions. While government recruiters should promote opportunities to serve the public, particularly in hiring for professional and managerial jobs, this recruitment strategy is likely to be more effective for teachers.

The overall quality of the public workforce is determined by governments’ ability to attract, hire, and retain high-quality employees. The rising need for new public employees and the declining desire of Americans (especially young, well-educated ones) to work for government suggests that recruitment into the public service will become an increasingly difficult challenge over the next decade. Part of the solution is simple: improve the marketing of government jobs and provide an easier, friendlier, quicker, and more transparent application process (Musser 2000). The rest of the solution is more complicated. In a booming economy in which jobs are easy to find and competition with other sectors is fierce, governments may need to systematically re-think the structure and rewards of the public personnel system to be sure that they are offering the type of jobs that talented young people really want.

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Notes

1. In the 1991 Survey of Federal Employees, conducted by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 58 percent *disagreed* that their pay was “fair considering what other places in this area pay for the same kind of work.”
2. A 1977 Gallup survey found that 64 percent of the general public believed federal government employees were “paid more ... than the same persons would earn in non-governmental jobs” (Langbein and Lewis 1998).
3. The GSS also asked respondents to choose between “Being an employee [or] being self-employed,” “Working in a small firm [or] working in a large firm,” and “Working in a manufacturing industry [or] in an office, sales, or service.”
4. The 1980 Census SIC codes are 900 through 932 (Definition 1), 842 through 860 (added under Definition 2), and 401, 412, 470, and 471 (added under Definition 3). Definition 1 is clearly too narrow, excluding many public-sector employees. The other definitions are both too broad and too narrow, including private school teachers and Greyhound bus drivers, but excluding government employees in other industries. Interestingly, workers added under Definition 3 were actually more likely to say they preferred government jobs than those in public administration or education. (Retired people were classified based on their most recent job.)
5. Only one-third of respondents were asked whether they were veterans. Because only 18 percent of those who were asked said they were veterans, we coded all people who were not asked as nonveterans. This measurement error is likely to lead to an understatement of the impact of veteran status.
6. Although we report pseudo- R^2 statistics for the logit models, they should not be interpreted as the percentage of the variation in the dependent variable that is explained by the model. Indeed, there are several different pseudo- R^2 statistics for logit models, none of them universally accepted. Because the dependent variable only takes on two values (0 and 1) and the expected values of the dependent variable are essentially probabilities, differences between expected and observed values of the dependent variable are high and pseudo- R^2 statistics are almost always quite low. (See Greene 1997, 891–94.)
7. The coefficient on education is five times higher under Definition 2 (which includes the education industry in public employment) than under Definition 1 (which only includes public administration).
8. The effect is probably overstated because higher percentages of those born after 1960 than of others were surveyed in 1998 than in 1989.
9. The coefficients on the interaction terms between *College Graduate* and *Female*, *Public-Service Motivation*, *Democrat*, and *Education* were all significant (*Democrat* at the .10 level, *Public-Service Motivation* and *Education* at the .05 level, and *Female* at the .001 level). In addition, a chi-square test of the full set of interaction terms was significant at the .0001 level.
10. Note that the *High Income* coefficient in the college graduates-only model suggests that better-educated respondents saw no major differences in pay between the public and private sectors.

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