

Public sector employees volunteer more, and may be able to pave the way to rebuilding social capital in the U.S.

In recent decades many commentators have expressed increasing concern over the apparent decline of civil society in the U.S. [Jaclyn Schede Piatak](#) explores one possible way to address this decline, using public sector employees, who, she argues, are more likely to volunteer. She writes that non-profit employees are much more likely to volunteer both formally and informally than those in the for-profit sector, due to their 'other-orientation' from their work. With this in mind, public and non-profit workers may be a valuable resource towards beginning to rebuild social capital and civic engagement in the U.S.



Historically, the United States has been known for its strong civil society, dating back to the early 1800s when Alexis de Tocqueville visited America before writing *Democracy in America*. However, [social capital](#) has been on the decline in recent decades with fewer people joining community groups, getting to know their neighbors, and even generally socializing. This decline could have serious impacts on the health of democracy and voluntary organizations.

At the same time, the face of public service continues to evolve as people carrying out the government's work can be found in all three sectors—government, nonprofit, and for-profit. Unlike those in previous generations, younger individuals may see opportunities to engage in public service in nonprofit and for-profit organizations just as much as in government agencies.

Is there a unique public service ethic? Are government and nonprofit sector employees more altruistic and more likely to volunteer than their for-profit sector counterparts? In [recent research](#), I find that they are. Nonprofit sector employees and government employees, especially those at the local government level, are more likely to volunteer both formally and informally than for-profit sector employees. Because volunteering is an important component of building social capital, variations in employee volunteering across sectors and levels of government could be instructive to efforts to enhance prosocial behavior and sustain social capital.

Volunteers play a vital role in society; from parents volunteering to serve in a parent teacher association to individuals serving food to those in need to others providing medical care or firefighting services. Despite the fundamental need for volunteers, in 2013 the [volunteer rate in the United States was at its lowest point](#) since the data was initially collected in 2002. This is disconcerting since [volunteering](#) encourages good citizenship and builds social capital.

What does it mean to volunteer?

A majority of the research on volunteering focuses on formal volunteering – that is volunteering through or for a formal organization. People choose to volunteer for numerous reasons ranging from altruistic to self-interested motives. People volunteer out the goodness of their heart, or to help others in anticipation of needing help in the future, or to meet others in order to make friends.

Aside from motivations to volunteer, personal resources like education and work also influence people's decision to volunteer. These sorts of resources typically increase the chances that an individual will be asked to volunteer due to larger social networks; and being asked is the most popular way people become involved in volunteering in the first place.

So an individual decides to volunteer, but that could be just once for an hour or two out of the entire year. Is there a difference? Many different [models of volunteering](#) exist, including one-time, episodic volunteers that devote one day to painting a local school or volunteering at a soup kitchen on a holiday. Interestingly, volunteer rates do not

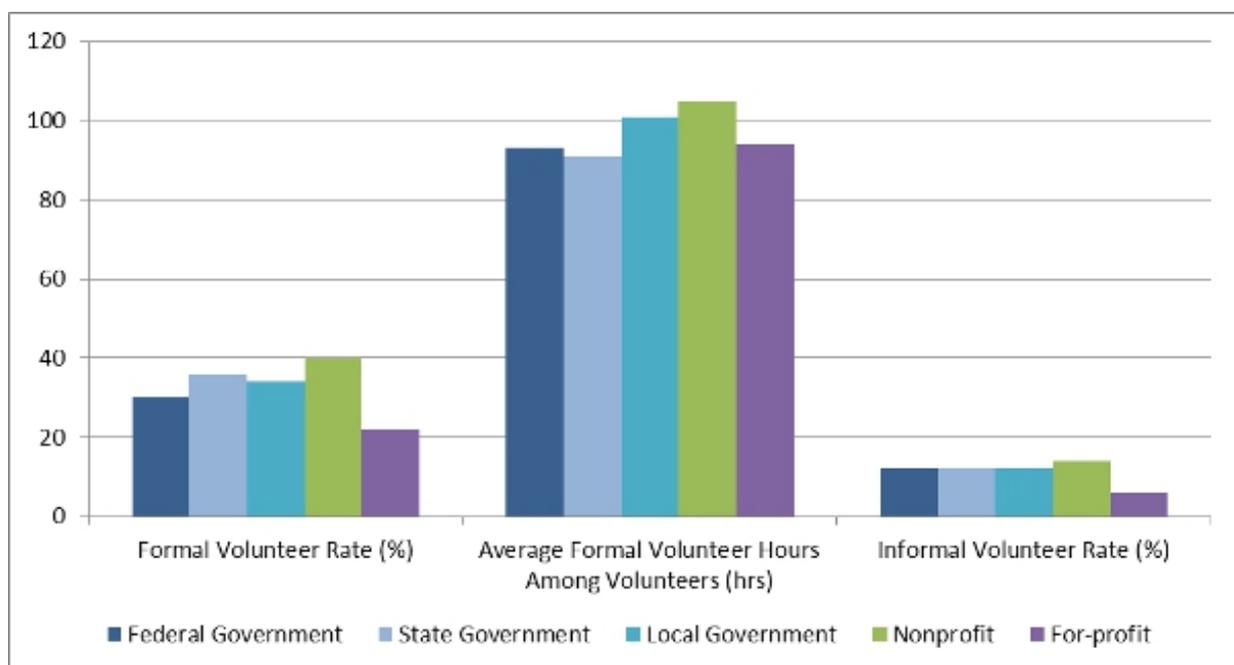
necessarily correspond to the amount of time volunteers devote to an organization. For example, women are more likely to volunteer than men, but male volunteers tend to devote more time to volunteering than female volunteers.

Besides volunteering for an organization, individuals may volunteer more informally in their communities. Informal volunteering, such as joining with your neighbors to fix a problem in the area, is much more complex and less known than formal volunteering, but is an important component of the volunteering landscape.

Can public employees pave the way to rebuilding social capital through the act of volunteering?

To examine this question, I use data from the September 2011 Volunteer Supplement of the Current Population Survey, a large nationally representative dataset conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As shown below, nonprofit employees have the highest formal volunteer rate, followed by state government employees, local government employees, and federal government employees. Nonprofit employees devote the most time to volunteering with an average of 105 hours annually, followed by local government with 101 hours. Nonprofit employees also have the highest informal volunteer rate, which is more than twice that of the for-profit sector.

Figure 1: Volunteer Rates and Average Volunteer Hours by Employment Sector



Source: Weighted Current Population Survey 2011, N = 60,967

Since time plays such a large role in an individual's decision to volunteer and the amount of time to devote, I look at full-time and part-time employees separately. For formal volunteering, employees in the nonprofit sector volunteer at the highest rates regardless of their work schedule. Public sector employees are also more likely to volunteer than for-profit sector employees, with the exception of part-time state and federal government employees.

In examining volunteer hours, I also found surprising differences within the government sector, where state government employees may contribute *less* time to volunteering than those in the for-profit sector, while local government employees may contribute *more* time to volunteering than those in the for-profit sector. For informal volunteering, nonprofit sector and local government employees consistently volunteer informally more than for-profit sector employees, regardless of work schedule. Only full-time state and federal government employees also tend to informally volunteer more than for-profit employees.

Public and nonprofit sector employees tend to volunteer more than their for-profit sector counterparts. However, these findings illustrate several important nuances when taking work schedule, levels of government, and

additional measures of volunteering into account. These findings suggest that perhaps nonprofit sector and local government employees are more other-oriented and community-oriented than not only those in the for-profit sector, but also state and federal government employees.

Lessons for public and nonprofit managers

These findings go beyond the bulk of the research on public sector distinctiveness to examine characteristics of the employees themselves. Are public sector employees fundamentally different from for-profit sector employees in some noteworthy respects? These analyses find that they are—public sector employees are more likely to volunteer than for-profit sector employees. Perhaps the other-oriented nature of public servants extends beyond the motivation to work in public service to help others when they are off the clock as well.

Nonprofit sector employees appear to be even more other-oriented than a majority of public servants. These findings have important implications for the recruitment and retention of public sector employees. If an individual wants to help others through their work, how do they choose between the public and nonprofit sector? In the bureaucratic environment of public sector work, how do you ensure these other-oriented employees feel like they are making a difference?

Important distinctions *within* the government sector across the federal, state, and local levels were found. Local teachers almost certainly differ from federal bureaucrats at the Department of Education, and even in similar occupations, state compliance officers may be different from federal compliance officers due to the nature of their work. Local government employees are more prone to volunteering than federal and state government employees. These findings coalesce with research on [public trust](#), where people tend to have the highest levels of trust in local government.

Overall, these findings suggest that nonprofit and local government employees are more other-oriented and community-oriented than for-profit sector employees through their tendencies to volunteer both formally and informally. The public sector and nonprofit sector are indeed distinct from the for-profit sector; at least in terms of the other-oriented employees who can perhaps pave the way to revive civic engagement.

This is based on the article [Altruism by Job Sector: Can Public Sector Employees Lead the Way in Rebuilding Social Capital?](#) *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, first published online April 2, 2014
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