



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

A New Call to Service for an Age of Savvy Altruism

Public Attitudes About Government and Government Workers

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The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to meeting the needs of government by inspiring a new generation to serve and revitalizing government. In its activities and publications, the Partnership focuses its energy on achieving leverage through entrepreneurial partnerships and collaboration. With an emphasis on action, accomplishments and measurable results, it acts as a catalyst for change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details survey work and focus groups conducted for the Partnership for Public Service on Americans' views of federal government workers. The non-partisan research is among the most comprehensive strategic investigations of what informs the public's views about the federal government and federal government workers. It also uncovers how the language used to describe the two affects voter attitudes as well as potential jobseekers' interest in government service. In the next five years, half of the federal workforce will be eligible for retirement. More than ever, understanding how to best recruit and hire a talented and motivated federal workforce is of critical importance.

The study's key conclusions include:

1. *Is The Era of Despised Government Over?*

Despite long-standing negative stereotypes about government work, the research shows that Americans have a favorable impression of the federal government. Decades of declining trust in the federal government seem to be changing course. While just 21 percent of Americans trusted government to do what is right "most or just about always" in 1994, 56 percent of the public by 2002 felt that way, according to surveys by National Election Studies. Our research found that more than 62 percent of the American people we surveyed view the federal government favorably, and 91 percent say that the jobs and duties of federal government workers are "important" in their lives. Even more surprisingly, this support cuts across ideological, racial and geographic lines.

2. *Words Matter*

While support for government may be broad, it is easily tarnished by anecdotes and negative language. The choice of words used to describe federal employees makes a huge difference: when voters are asked about "federal government workers," 71 percent of respondents have a favorable response. But when asked about "federal government bureaucrats," the number of people reacting positively drops to only 20 percent.

3. *The Federal Workplace: Modernize or Bust*

A perception that the federal government is overly bureaucratic is the major hurdle that must be overcome in order to attract top talent into government. Today, well over half of college students and recent graduates (58 percent) say the main reason not to work for the federal government is "too much bureaucracy." To shatter the negative attitudes, the polling results show that Americans want a sense that government is undergoing significant institutional reforms. In focus groups, even people who have positive views toward government in general see it as a place that stifles creativity and entrepreneurial thinking. The popularity of innovations like merit-based pay and increased accountability revealed in the poll demonstrate the need to let the public know that the federal government is in fact changing.

4. *Rejecting an "i, Robot" Culture*

Job seekers are searching for an "iPod" culture that promotes creativity and innovation while running away from an "i,Robot" work environment they perceive to be limiting their ambitions. The survey and focus groups showed that a significant number of people view government workers as fundamentally different than themselves. While 75 percent

of people agree with the statement “there are great jobs for regular people in the federal government,” only 51 percent agree with the statement “there are great jobs for people like me in the federal government.” Who are “people like me”? Focus groups showed that most people think of themselves as innovators who thrive in an environment that promotes creativity and rewards ambition. In addition, 58 percent “feel the federal government needs to recruit a higher quality of employee than what the federal workforce is currently comprised of.” Unless concrete steps are taken to let people know that there are talented, motivated people like them in government, the influx of new talent will continue to be a trickle, not a flood.

5. *The Age of Savvy Altruism*

This research suggests that future recruiting must blend a call to public service with a picture of the practical benefits of working for the government – idealism that takes you places. This combination of altruism and self-interest appeals to a population that may be drawn to public service but has been turned off by images of a workforce that is perceived to be unlike them, inconsequential, in need of reform, and financially non-competitive with the private sector. For the appeal to savvy altruism to be effective, these concerns must be addressed by showing Americans that the government is reforming and that the people who work in it are like them.

Among other important findings, the research demonstrates:

- ★ Seventy-two percent said they would be more likely “to vote for a candidate for President or Congress who wants to make it a priority to

recruit the best and the brightest to come work in the federal government.”

- ★ Interest in working for the federal government is non-partisan – Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals all seem to agree on the pros and cons of working for the federal government and seem to be swayed by the same arguments.
- ★ The Washington elite are not in sync with the more positive views of the general public on the federal government and federal government workers.
- ★ The federal government must clear higher hurdles to recruit mid-career professionals and citizens from Hispanic households into the federal workforce. Unlike recent college graduates who showed high rates of interest in federal employment, interest falls off as people get older. The demographic group with the least favorable views of government workers was Hispanic households.
- ★ For most people, the top two reasons to work for the federal government are “good benefits like: health insurance, vacation and retirement” and “being able to help people and make a difference in people’s lives.”

Overall, the survey findings were surprisingly uniform across political and ideological boundaries— voters say they will reward candidates who make recruitment for the federal workforce a serious political issue. Supporters of improved recruiting and retention of federal workers on both sides of the aisle must make a real investment in reaching out and educating Americans. There are obstacles, but building a more talented and respected government workforce is within our grasp.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The Partnership for Public Service is a non-profit organization that seeks to make the federal government an employer of choice for talented, dedicated Americans. As part of that mission, this research seeks to better understand the challenges to and opportunities for recruiting a high-quality federal workforce. It augments earlier investigations by the Partnership of American attitudes toward public service.

In our initial research, we learned that the number one barrier to recruiting talented workers to federal employment was widespread ignorance about the opportunities offered in federal government service. Americans felt they not only had more information about private sector and nonprofit job opportunities but that they could have a greater impact working in these places as opposed to the federal government.¹

Uncovering the existing knowledge gap on government and government jobs was a significant finding in itself, but we also discovered the necessity of incorporating a research model that enriched these descriptive conclusions with more prescriptive findings. Any successful education and outreach campaign to raise interest in federal service needs to bridge the knowledge gap as well as reach Americans on an emotional level.

This report represents the next phase of our research by setting out to determine more effective ways of communicating the value of government service to the general public and, more specifically, to recent college graduates and mid-career professionals.

Opinion polls have gauged the public's views of the federal government for decades. Historically, these inquiries have often focused on Americans' trust and confidence in their government, as well as young people's interest in government

service versus private sector opportunities.

While these studies have traced the ebb and flow of public opinion, they have been primarily descriptive in nature, often tracking the volatility of American public opinion toward government at critical junctures in our nation's history such as post-Watergate and now post-September 11. This particular inquiry takes the pulse of public opinion but also reaches to provide a more prescriptive element by exploring individuals' incentives and disincentives for working for the federal government. In addition, it tested a wide range of potential messages and identified key themes that resonate with the public.

In particular, we targeted mid-career professionals and recent college graduates. The research also included one-on-one phone interviews with elite opinion leaders (Congressional staff, government leaders and political reporters) and five focus groups held across the country prior to administering the national survey.

The report is divided into two areas of findings: first, the report takes a snapshot of likely voter attitudes and second, the report attempts to construct an effective new message approach, laying out the key components of how to improve communications about federal work.

In order to be able to speak convincingly with political leaders, the project employed a bipartisan team of professional political consultants and gave them independence to study the problem and report back whatever findings they discovered. Employed for the survey were Bill Knapp, a leading Democratic consultant who helped oversee advertising in President Bill Clinton's 1996 campaign, Vice President Al Gore's 2000 race, and who helps lead a variety of races for 2004; Jim McLaughlin, who helped conduct the polling for Senator Bob Dole's 1996 presidential race, has served as a consultant to

Senator Jesse Helms, and is currently a pollster for the National Republican Congressional Committee; and Tom Freedman, who served as a senior advisor to President Clinton, was the senior aide for political strategy in President Clinton's 1996 campaign, and currently serves as a researcher and consultant. As is apparent from their brief biographies, Mr. McLaughlin worked against Mr. Knapp and Mr. Freedman in the 1996 presidential race.

The national survey was conducted among 600 likely voters between May 10-13, 2004. Oversamples of 150 college students/recent college graduates and 150 mid-career professionals were also conducted. Combined with the targeted segments from the original 600 sample, a total of 228 college students/recent college graduates and 341 mid-career professionals were surveyed. All interviews were conducted via telephone by professionally trained data collectors on McLaughlin & Associates' state-of-the art CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. Respondent selection was at random. The sample of 600 likely voters has an accuracy of +/- 4.0 percent at the 95 percent confidence interval. The sample of 228 college students/recent college graduates has an accuracy of +/- 6.5 percent at a 95 percent confidence interval. The sample of 341 mid-career professionals has an accuracy of +/- 5.3 percent at a 95 percent confidence interval. A brief follow-up poll was conducted on July 15, 2004, polling 1,000 likely voters nationwide, with identical methodology.

The focus group research included five different groups: two groups among voters in Paramus, New Jersey; two groups in Atlanta, Georgia (one among college seniors and recent graduates and one other voter group); and a fifth group in Cleveland, Ohio, consisting of mid-career professionals.

THE LANDSCAPE: SPECIFIC FINDINGS ABOUT THE STATE OF GOVERNMENT WORKERS

The study asked a number of specific questions about attitudes towards government in order to understand how people view the federal government and the people who work in it. Questions focused on federal government workers in general, specific agencies and positions, and personal interactions with government workers.

The research found that current perceptions of government workers are not as dire as stereotypes might lead one to believe. The public has better than expected opinions of the federal government and of federal government workers, and most say that their interactions with government employees have been positive. Particularly when compared with data from previous decades, it becomes clear that there is now a strong base of favorable opinion upon which to build successful recruitment and public outreach campaigns. While comparable longitudinal studies on attitudes toward civil servants are hard to come by, opinions seem to be significantly more favorable than they have been in the past. For example, a 1981 Los Angeles Times poll found "government workers" had a 55 percent favorable rating and a 38 percent unfavorable rating. In this survey, "federal government workers" had a 71 percent favorable rating and an 18 percent unfavorable rating.

The strong majority (71 percent) of likely voters who say they have a favorable impression of federal government workers outpaces even the number of Americans who say they have a favorable impression of the federal government itself (62 percent). An impressive 91 percent say that the jobs and duties of federal government workers are "important" in their lives. These favorable opinions cut across ideological, racial

and geographical lines, indicating a broad appreciation of and support for the federal government and the work that it does. The results suggest not only a richer than expected audience for recruitment but also that those politicians who continue to bash public servants are vulnerable to counterattack – and not aligned with where voters are.

There are some notable differences in attitudes towards different types of government workers and among different public audiences. State and local government workers receive a more favorable response (78 percent) than federal government workers (71 percent). Also, college students and recent graduates have more favorable opinions of the federal government (72 percent) than the population in general (62 percent).

Voters' views on the federal government depend largely on what aspect of the government they are asked to think of and how it is described. For example, the phrase "public servants" is received more favorably than "civil servants," particularly among college students, who prefer "public servants" 71 percent to 60 percent. Individual agencies receive surprisingly strong favorable ratings: IRS workers receive a 68 percent favorable rating, and Social Security Agency workers receive a 76 percent favorable rating. Particularly worth noting, an overwhelming 93 percent of voters have favorable impressions of those who serve in the military.² Clearly, this is a base of support on which to build. Beyond this strong support for the military, there is also a generalized appreciation for government workers – all positions mentioned in the poll received a majority favorable rating.

On the negative side, although just a plurality, the most common voter reaction to federal gov-

ernment workers is summarized in the word "bureaucrats." The term "federal government workers" receives a favorable response from 71 percent of those surveyed, but the term "federal government bureaucrats" receives only 20 percent – a drop of 51 percent with one word. Furthermore, when asked what the federal government does well (aside from the military), the plurality responded by mocking the government, despite the fact that 61 percent say that they have had mostly good experiences interacting with government workers. This finding is backed up by responses during focus groups, in which people associated the government with the frustration of waiting in lines – even if they themselves rarely had to wait in lines.

These negative views of the government are not necessarily based on personal experience, but they are nonetheless widespread. Nearly half of those surveyed could not think of a response when asked what federal government workers (besides the military) do well. When asked "what is one thing that federal government workers could do to serve you better?," the most common responses given are to "listen to input from the public" and "do their jobs correctly." As one focus group respondent put it, "they sit on their butts all day. And no one gets fired." Many respondents in the focus groups viewed federal government workers as being uncaring, unfriendly and unhelpful. The survey shows that these unfavorable views were particularly prevalent in Hispanic households, where only 58 percent viewed federal government workers favorably, compared to 73 percent for non-Hispanic households. This gap indicates a pervasive image problem in Hispanic households that the government should address. It's particularly noteworthy because Hispanics remain the only minority group that is underrepresented in the

federal government compared to their representation in the civilian labor force. As of September 2002, only 6.9 percent of the federal workforce is Hispanic, compared to 12.2 percent of the non-government workforce.

Perhaps the most negative perceptions of government workers are expressed in the twenty phone interviews conducted with a bipartisan selection of political elites, government leaders, political reporters and opinion leaders in Washington, D.C. Their overall attitudes toward the federal government worker are more negative than positive. While only representing a small focus group, their perceptions stand in stark contrast to the generally favorable attitudes held by the public. This suggests a possible disconnect between what elites think and what the average voter may actually feel toward their federal worker.

Washington elites tend to characterize government workers as “low performers” that “lacked creativity and gusto” for career challenges and advancement. However, there is recognition that the actual duties performed by government workers are somewhat important to average people in their daily lives. Elites share with the general public a consensus that reforms are needed to improve the image of the federal government and workforce and to attract more talented employees.

While this study is the first to collect data on many of these specific questions, it is worth placing the figures into historical perspective to see how opinions of the federal government have changed overtime. For example:

★ Data from the National Election Studies shows that the number of people who trust the government “most of the time” or “just about always,” after increasing throughout the

late 1990s, reached a 30-year high of 56 percent in 2002 (the last year for which there is data). This increase, however, does not eclipse a peak of 76 percent in 1964.

★ In a 1997 survey by the Pew Research Center, the federal government had a 38 percent favorable rating, compared to a 62 percent favorable rating in this poll.³

★ In a 1981 CBS/New York Times poll, 63 percent of respondents said the government creates more problems than it solves and 19 percent said it solves more problems than it creates. Twenty years later, a 2001 poll that asked the same question found that 44 percent said the federal government creates more problems, and 42 percent said it solves more problems. While a plurality still say the federal government creates more problems than it solves, the gap has dropped from 44 points to only two, a remarkable improvement.

★ In the post-9/11 era, voters are more likely to say that government has a “positive impact” on people’s lives. In a 1996 CBS poll, 33 percent said government had a “positive impact” on people’s lives, and 45 percent said government had a “negative impact” on people’s lives. In a November 2001 survey, 55 percent said positive impact, and 15 percent said it had a negative impact. But these results are tempered by a 2002 Brookings Institution survey that found 40 percent of Americans said you can “trust in government to do what is right” just about always or most of the time. This is compared with 57 percent immediately after September 11 and 29 percent in July 2001.⁴

★ In a 2002 survey, young people were far more trusting of government than other generational groups and were more willing than

older groups to see government play a more active role in public affairs. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) poll found that nearly two-thirds of young people thought “government should do more to solve problems.”⁵ In 2004, however, poll results CIRCLE released with the Center for Democracy and Citizenship found the percentage of young Americans (15 to 25) who say they “trust the government to do the right thing a lot or some of the time” fell from 62 percent in January 2002 to 50 percent in November 2003.⁶

While these trends in public opinion suggest that Americans today may be more poised for a renewed call to government service, there still remains volatility in the electorate. And while there appears to be an up-tick in Americans favorable impressions of the federal government, particularly among young Americans, our

research found that these views are sometimes overshadowed by the general perception that the federal government is a daunting bureaucracy. This report discusses in Section IV the need to highlight ongoing reforms in any future message about federal service. A successful outreach and education effort will be one that emphasizes those favorable impressions and leverages positive ideals along with arguments about ongoing reform to allow voters to abandon negative stereotypes.

WORKING FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: WHAT POTENTIAL APPLICANTS THINK

Americans’ motivations for wanting to work for the federal government are varied, but they fall into two general categories: altruism and self-interest. About 60 percent of respondents say that practical considerations such as good benefits, insurance and job security are the best rea-

From the following list, which reason do you feel would be the best reason to work in the federal government, other than the military (1st & 2nd choice, top responses)?

| | Total | College/ Recent Graduates | Mid-Career Professionals |
|---|-------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Good benefits like: health insurance, vacation and retirement</i> | 54 | 44 | 49 |
| <i>Being able to help people and make a difference in people’s lives</i> | 32 | 37 | 31 |
| <i>You have the opportunity to work on, and make an impact on, issues and causes you feel strongly about.</i> | 22 | 24 | 25 |
| <i>Good pay and wages</i> | 19 | 15 | 15 |
| <i>Serving your country and community</i> | 19 | 21 | 27 |
| <i>Job security</i> | 17 | 18 | 15 |

son to work for the federal government. The single most popular reason to work in the federal government is “good benefits like health insurance, vacation, and retirement.” On the other hand, about 40 percent give altruistic reasons such as “being able to help people and make a difference in people’s lives,” being able “to work on, and make an impact on, issues and causes you feel strongly about” and “serving your country and community.”⁷ While it is clear that simple appeals to altruism don’t do enough to motivate potential applicants, it is equally clear that a one-dimensional message of self-interest leaves no comparative advantage for government work.

By far the most common concern (56 percent) blocking Americans from wanting to work in the federal government is that there is “too much bureaucracy.” This is the major roadblock that must be overcome in order to persuade people to apply for federal jobs. People imagine working for the federal government as an exercise in frustration, hampered by red tape and surrounded by “bureaucrats.”⁸ The perceived lack of meritocracy and freedom are particularly toxic to young people. One student in a focus group said, “It’s a rut. It’s the same thing day and day, over and over, you never have the

opportunity to do anything else – you are stuck.” People are looking for entrepreneurship and don’t think they’ll find it in the federal government. “Society changes, but a lot of people in those positions say ‘we’ve done it this way, and we’ll keep doing it the same way,’” one participant said. “But you have to look at new things, new ways of doing things no matter what.”

A further obstacle is that people don’t think that there are federal jobs suited to them in particular, or they perceive themselves as different from those who work for the government. While 75 percent agree that “there are great jobs for regular people in the federal government,” only 51 percent agree that “there are great jobs for people like me in the federal government.” An enormous challenge for future efforts will be to make future applicants feel they are joining a cohort much like themselves in government service. It is worth noting, however, that this gap does not exist among college students and recent graduates.

In terms of the specific demographic groups targeted in this survey, interest in working for the federal government is stronger among college students and recent graduates (65 percent interested) than among mid-career professionals (49

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

| | Agree/Disagree | | |
|--|----------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Total | College/ Recent Graduates | Mid-Career Professionals |
| <i>“There are great jobs for regular people in the federal government.”</i> | 75/18 | 70/25 | 70/22 |
| <i>“There are great jobs for people like me in the federal government.”</i> | 51/41 | 69/31 | 49/47 |

Profile of People Who Are Interested in Working for the Federal Government

| <u>PARTY</u> | | <u>IDEOLOGY</u> | | <u>RACE</u> | | <u>RELIGION</u> | | <u>GENDER</u> | |
|--------------|-----|-----------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|-------------------------|-----|---------------|-----|
| REPUBLICAN | 28% | LIBERAL | 19% | WHITE | 73% | PROTESTANT | 51% | Men | 51% |
| DEMOCRAT | 40% | MODERATE | 46% | AFRICAN-AMERICAN | 17% | CATHOLIC | 29% | WOMEN | 49% |
| INDEPENDENT | 26% | CONSERVATIVE | 30% | HISPANIC | 9% | REGULARLY ATTEND CHURCH | 63% | | |

| <u>AREA</u> | <u>EDUCATION</u> | | <u>INCOME</u> | | <u>AGE</u> | | |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| NORTHEAST | 17% | LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL | 2% | UNDER \$20K | 15% | 18-25 | 6% |
| SOUTH | 35% | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE | 23% | \$20-\$40K | 28% | 26-35 | 17% |
| MIDWEST | 28% | SOME COLLEGE | 29% | \$40-\$60K | 14% | 36-45 | 22% |
| WEST | 19% | COLLEGE GRADUATE | 28% | \$60-\$75K | 8% | 46-55 | 22% |
| | | POST GRADUATE | 13% | \$75-\$100K | 8% | 56-60 | 9% |
| | | | | OVER \$100K | 12% | 61-65 | 6% |
| | | | | | | OVER 65 | 16% |

Bold indicates groups that are over-represented by at least four points when compared to overall sample profile

percent interested). Couple this knowledge with the impending retirement crunch facing the federal government, and you get a clearer picture of the mid-career recruitment challenges ahead.

The federal government continues to draw the vast majority of its mid-career hires from within its workforce via competitive promotion. But the number of mid-career employees eligible to retire in the coming years exceeds the number of promotion-ready candidates who are already in

the federal government.⁹ The retirement crunch will hit mid-career levels hardest, further exacerbating “talent gaps” that exist throughout the civil service today. As interest in working for the federal government trails off with increasing age, the federal government’s search for skilled specialists and managerial experience will need to be particularly attuned to the messages that will engage this talent pool.

In general, the profile of people who are “very

interested” or “somewhat interested” in working for the federal government leans toward: moderates, ages 26-45, low-income households (under \$40,000) and African-Americans.

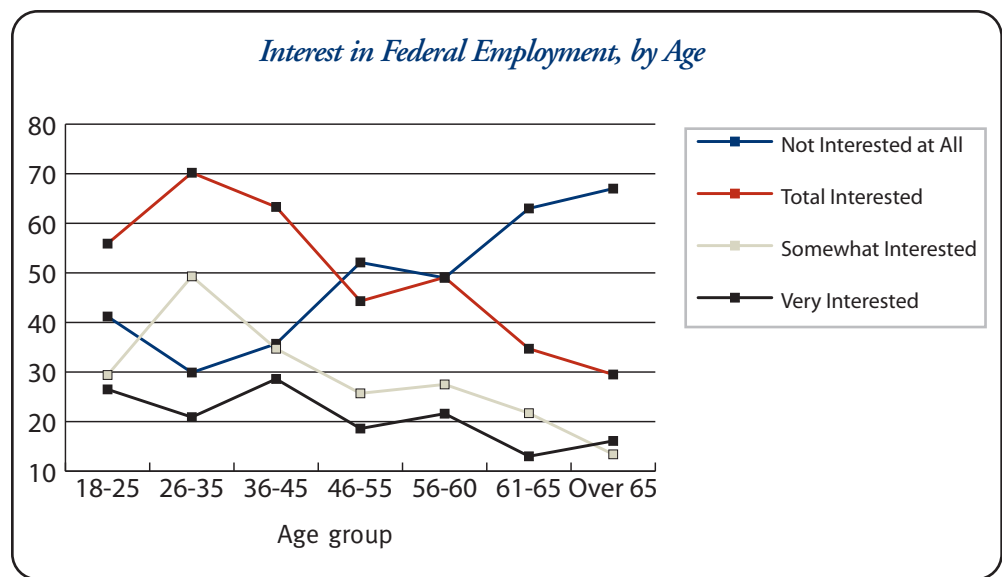
In general, there is a trend away from being interested in working for the federal government as people get older. However, even in the 36-45 year-old category, 63 percent of voters say they are interested in working for the federal government. As the chart below indicates, there is a wide age range of interested potential employees and there are good opportunities to recruit mid-career professionals, although the best age to recruit is still quite young.

Finally, the research shows that government recruitment must acknowledge the challenge to altruism-based recruitment from nonprofits. Respondents see nonprofits as the best place to make a difference in people’s lives (57 percent

percent nonprofits, 18 percent federal government). “Usually, in a nonprofit, people are doing it for a passion, something they believe in,” one focus group participant said. “I would say there are a higher percentage of people working there who are passionate about what they do than in government or the private sector.” Another woman said, “I don’t think people become federal government workers to help people; I think they want a job.” If one of the main appeals of working for the federal government is being able to make a difference in people’s lives, there is much work to be done to convince Americans there is potential to do that in the federal government, just as there is in a nonprofit.

BUILDING A MESSAGE

This survey revealed three fundamental components that must underlie any attempt to



engage Americans in the promise and potential of federal employment. First, the message must be built on the idea that working for the federal government is a form of service to community and nation. Second, it must show the practical financial and career benefits of working for

compared to 17 percent for the federal government). The finding is even more pronounced among college students and recent graduates (65

the government. The notions of service and self-interest need to be combined to address the “savvy altruism” that appears to be driving

employment choices. The message should reinforce the concept that working for the government is idealism that takes you places. The third element of the message must make people realize that the work is for people like them – that government is being reformed and there are people like them moving into these jobs. The most successful slogans tested all reflected elements of these approaches. The messages that scored best included concepts such as: “reforming government, helping people,” “working toward a stronger future – yours and ours,” “a call to serve,” and “great jobs for talented people.”

A. Federal Employment as Service

The most popular messages were about service and helping people. Phrases like “making a difference by helping your country,” and “making a difference in people’s lives” made 83 percent of those surveyed more likely to consider working for the federal government. It is worth noting that five of the six most effective messages addressed the altruistic reasons for wanting to work for the federal government, rather than the practical benefits. Furthermore, people strongly prefer to conceptualize federal jobs in terms of service rather than power. Messages that mentioned “wielding immense power” and “having great power and influence” were among the least popular tested. So while practical benefits are important to people as they consider working for the government, appeals to idealism and altruism work better as central rhetorical strategies.

However, Americans seemed less taken with abstract rhetoric about serving the country or changing the world. President Kennedy’s famous call to service, “Ask not what your

country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” polled well (70 percent favorable) but toward the bottom of messages tested in the poll. Young people, in particular, preferred more tangible and immediate goals such as “get important things done and help make a difference in people’s lives.”¹⁰

B. Federal Employment as a Smart Move

Most people already recognize the practical benefits of working for the federal government. Sixty percent gave pragmatic reasons like good benefits, early retirement, insurance and job security as the best reasons to work for the government. A strong message will remind them of these advantages, possibly with specific examples to make the issue more tangible. College-age participants in focus groups said the things they wanted in a job included: “learning experience,” “benefits,” “salary,” and “security” – all essential parts of federal employment. These specific benefits can be key elements in reassuring people that the government is a good place to work.

C. Federal Employment Is For People Like You

The previous two components might well be helpful in recruitment, but they will be ineffective unless Americans shift from seeing federal employment as an appealing possibility in the abstract to seeing it as genuine career option for someone like themselves.

In order to successfully convince Americans that they might belong in federal service, an effort must be made to show that: (1) the government is changing and (2) that there are already people in government like the applicants. As a preliminary matter, the argument that the government has been improving

workplace conditions and increasing merit pay and accountability was very powerful. This tested particularly well with college students and recent graduates (81 percent), likely because it allays fears of being stuck in a non-productive stereotypical environment. In general, messages that include information about how the government workplace is being reformed is well-received – arguments that the government is being “modernized” (73 percent) and “reformed” (71 percent) have real traction in interesting Americans toward government work. In addition, reminding applicants of the skills and education of other government workers was a powerful augmenting argument (75 percent).

The positive response to these messages is roughly even across political and ideological boundaries. Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals all seem to basically agree on the pros and cons of working for the federal government and seem to be swayed by the same arguments. The almost total non-partisanship of this issue is a valuable asset in generating political support for recruitment and other initiatives.

In one-on-one interviews with elite opinion-makers, the military is seen as an excellent example of how to recruit individuals for government service. The military is commended for its advertising campaigns, which emphasize job benefits and meritocracy, as well for its aggressive recruitment on college campuses. The civil service, however, is seen as being lax in this area, approaching students too late and with insufficient enthusiasm and effort.

A tangential obstacle that can be overcome is that people say they are interested in working for the federal government but do not believe that there are good federal jobs in their area (30 percent). A message targeting this group that emphasized the geographical and thematic diversity of government jobs could serve to boost interest.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that working for the federal government can be appealing to a large number of Americans. Successful outreach and education efforts must be based on practical benefits to applicants and emphasizing the opportunity federal work offers on important issues for the benefit of their country and community, along with the notion that the federal workplace is being reformed. It is this mixture of practical and altruistic appeals that the federal government must emphasize as it works to recruit the next generation of leaders.

The crucial next steps must be to meld these concepts together into a message that can be delivered to those who talk to Americans regularly about the work of government: federal agencies, political and civic leaders, and educators on university campuses. This research shows great potential to change public attitudes but real obstacles to overcome. A successful effort will reaffirm what Americans already like about their public servants and educate Americans about the reforms and opportunities that make federal work a great place for someone like them.

Endnotes

- 1 Partnership for Public Service, “The Unanswered Call to Public Service: American’s Attitudes Before and After September 11.” Washington D.C.: 2001. For more recent studies that further document attitudes towards working for nonprofit organizations, the private sector and government, particularly among young Americans, see Paul C. Light, “In Search of Public Service.” Washington, D.C.: Center for Public Service, The Brookings Institution, June 2003, and Peter D. Hart, “Calling Young People to Government Service: From ‘Ask Not...’ to ‘Not Asked.’” Washington, D.C.: Council for Excellence in Government, March 2004.
- 2 Americans’ overwhelming support for those who serve in the military suggests an intuitive appreciation for the notion of workforce readiness which is not equally reflected in attitudes toward the civilian workforce. This gap, however, may offer a useful baseline from which to measure the success of efforts to increase public support for civil servants. One incongruity in this arena is that while support for the military was strong, the public ranked military marketing slogans such as “Army of One” quite low in the survey.
- 3 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Deconstructing Distrust: How Americans View Government.” Washington, D.C.: March, 1998.
- 4 G. Calvin Mackenzie and Judith M. Labiner, “Opportunity Lost: The Rise and Fall of Trust and Confidence in Government After September 11.” Washington, D.C.: Center for Public Service, The Brookings Institution, May 30, 2002.
- 5 Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina and Krista Jenkins, “The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait.” New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, September 19, 2002.
- 6 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Council for Excellence in Government. “Youth Survey on Internet Issues. Youth Engagement.” Washington, D.C.: 2004.
- 7 These figures were determined by taking the responses to the question “From the following list, which reason do you feel would be the best reason to work in the federal government, other than the military?” and dividing them into “altruistic” and “practical” reasons.
- 8 Contributing to these negative perceptions is a well-documented broken hiring process throughout the federal government. See Office of Personnel Management (OPM), “What do Federal Employees Say?” Washington, D.C.: 2002; OPM, “Federal Human Capital Survey, Report On Agency Survey on Improving the Hiring Process.” Washington, D.C.: May 2003; OPM, “Report On Agency Survey on Improving the Hiring Process.” Washington, D.C.: May 2004; Merit Systems Protection Board, “Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Experiences of New Hires.” Washington, D.C.: February 2000; Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, Inc., “Students Want to Join Government, But Most are Turned off by Bureaucratic Hurdles, Backward and Uncaring Employment Practices.” July 16, 2002; General Accounting Office, “Opportunities to Improve Executive Agencies’ Hiring Processes.” Washington, D.C.: May 2003.
- 9 For more discussion on the challenges facing the federal government’s ability to recruit and hire mid-career professionals see Partnership for Public Service, “Mid-Career Hiring in the Federal Government: A Strategy for Change.” Washington, D.C.: February 22, 2002. Also see forthcoming Partnership for Public Service, “Mid-Career Hiring: Revisiting the Search for Seasoned Talent in the Federal Government.” Washington, D.C.: September, 2004.
- 10 This finding is consistent with an earlier Partnership poll revealing that making a difference is tied to a strong desire to have an individual, direct impact on others, instead of being a part of a collective effort to make changes on a larger scale. See Partnership for Public Service, “The Unanswered Call to Public Service: Americans’ Attitudes Before and After September 11, 2001.”



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