

RECRUITING YOUNG TALENT TO GOVERNMENT

IN A FIELD EXPERIMENT (N = 7,267), WE TESTED THE IMPACT OF HIGHLIGHTING THREE DIFFERENT ATTRIBUTES OF GOVERNMENT WORK ON MOTIVATION TO JOIN THE GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE THROUGH THE GOVERN FOR AMERICA (GFA) FELLOWSHIP. WE FOUND THAT FRAMING THE FELLOWSHIP AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM INCREASED FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS BY NEARLY 50% COMPARED TO A MESSAGE THAT FRAMED IT AS A CHALLENGING PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITY, AND BY ABOUT 40% COMPARED TO A MESSAGE THAT FRAMED IT AS A CHANCE TO JOIN A GROUP OF LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS. VERY PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT RECRUITMENT MESSAGING MAY ALSO AFFECT CANDIDATES' PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT WORK AND WORKERS. THESE FINDINGS DEMONSTRATE THAT THE WAY IN WHICH GOVERNMENT WORK IS FRAMED CAN MEANINGFULLY AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOTIVATION TO ENTER THE GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE.

The challenge

The federal government workforce is undergoing a significant demographic shift. While people under 34 years old comprise 34% of the private sector workforce, they make up only 25% of the total public sector workforce, and only 16% of the federal government workforce (Deloitte, 2015). In fact, within the federal government, there are twice as many workers over age 60 as there are under 30 (Partnership for Public Service, 2019). This shortage of younger workers not only reflects a major operational crisis for the public sector as older workers retire, but also suggests that a broader challenge exists in recruiting and retaining diverse talent in government.

While the potential consequences of the aging public sector workforce are well-documented, there is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of specific recruitment strategies for attracting young and diverse talent into public sector jobs. One potential lever to encourage young people to work in government is greater investment in short-term early-career fellowship programs, such as Govern For America, the Presidential Management Fellowship Program, Coding it Forward, and others. However, just like for public sector jobs more broadly, research on effective methods of recruiting young people for these fellowship programs is lacking.

What we did

In partnership with Govern For America, we co-designed a pilot study to better understand how to motivate youth to pursue professional careers in the public sector. In a randomized controlled trial with 7,267 college students and recent graduates across the U.S., we evaluated how the framing of recruitment messages for the GFA fellowship program influenced application rates. From September to December 2020, prospective applicants received one of three recruitment emails:

1. **Challenge yourself:** This email emphasized that the GFA fellowship could help participants build critical skills through fast paced, challenging, and impactful work.
2. **Join the movement:** This email emphasized that participants in the GFA fellowship would join a group of like-minded people who believe in the power of government to have a positive impact.
3. **Change the system:** This email emphasized that GfA fellows could play a role in changing unfair systems and, thereby, have a large-scale impact.

All emails were of similar length, were sent by GFA, and included a link to the 2020 fellowship application site.

Our Findings

Overall 1.7% of candidates who received an email applied for the GfA fellowship. Candidates who were sent the “Change the system” message were more likely to apply for the fellowship than candidates who were sent one of the other two messages: 2.5% of candidates who were sent the “Change the system” message applied for the fellowship, compared to 1.7% of candidates who were sent the “Challenge yourself” message and 1.9% of candidates who were sent the “Join the movement” message--a 47% and 39% increase, respectively.



The impact of the “Change the system” message on application rates was most pronounced among cisgender female, gender nonconforming, trans and non-binary applicants.

In addition, we asked candidates about their views on government work and workers, public service, and inequality. Preliminary evidence suggests that the recruitment message may have affected candidates’ perceptions of government workers and public service. Those applicants who were recruited through the “Change the System” message have more negative perceptions about government and government workers, although additional research is needed to fully understand this relationship.

Next Steps

As the public sector workforce ages, recruiting young talent is a top organizational and policy priority for many state, local, and federal government agencies. Understanding how recruitment messaging can affect young people’s motivation to enter public service, and how these effects differ by population, is crucial for recruiting young talent to the public sector. These findings demonstrate that the way in which government work is framed can meaningfully affect the impact of recruitment messaging.

This research has implications for other early-career government fellowship programs, as well as public sector agencies more broadly. Future research should explore how the efficacy of recruitment messaging differs by both the demographics of the prospective applicant population, as well as by the type of opportunity (e.g., state versus federal government; fellowship vs. career public service).

Additional Resources

Read more about our work:

- [Project page](#)

Related research on recruitment:

- [Levelling the playing field in police recruitment: Evidence from a field experiment on test performance](#)

ABOUT US

The People Lab aims to transform the public sector, by producing cutting-edge research on the people in government and the communities they serve. We collaborate with governments and other stakeholders to evaluate strategies that can strengthen the public-sector workforce, improve public service delivery, and foster engaged communities. Our team brings together public management scholars, behavioral economists, political scientists and public policy experts who are committed to evidence-based policy making, and who use rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and experimental methods to better understand what works. All projects are co-designed with our partners to ensure feasibility and scalability. Visit us at peoplelab.berkeley.edu.