

GETTING YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR: THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC SECTOR FELLOWSHIPS ON CAREER TRAJECTORIES

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The People Lab



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Governments face significant challenges in attracting and retaining younger talent, leading to a workforce increasingly skewed toward older employees. This study examines the impact of public sector fellowship programs as alternative pathways into government roles. Leveraging data from 17 cohorts of applicants in four U.S. fellowship programs over 19 years ($n = 2,141$; 31,153 individual-year observations), we compare the career trajectories of fellows and similarly motivated finalists. Specifically, we ask whether participating in a public sector fellowship program increases the likelihood that a person will pursue a career in government.

CONTEXT

Governments are struggling to attract and retain younger talent in public service, which threatens its ability to address pressing challenges and effectively deliver services.^{1,2} As of 2023, the U.S. federal government workforce had nearly seven times more employees over 50 than under 30, with one-third of all employees eligible to retire in the subsequent four years. Yet younger employees are not filling these roles quickly enough.³ Therefore understanding how to attract and retain talent in government continues to be an urgent priority.

Research shows that this challenge is not necessarily driven by a lack of interest. It can be difficult and time-consuming to get a government job. For instance, hiring in the public sector often entails logistical hurdles, such as unclear and complex civil service exams, and takes an average of 98 days for the federal government—more than twice as long as the typical hiring process in the private sector.⁴ Public sector fellowship programs can offer a nontraditional pathway into federal, state, and local government for those who might be motivated. While individual fellowship programs may differ in their focus, nearly all aim to bring specialized talent into government and are designed for individuals who have little previous experience in the public sector. During such a program, fellows work in government positions alongside career civil servants for one- to two-year appointments and, depending on the fellowship, may also be directly hired by the government agency upon completion, simplifying post-fellowship retention efforts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Participation in fellowship programs significantly increases employment in government with effects persisting up to eight years.
- 2 Similarly motivated individuals who do not participate in fellowship programs are more likely to be employed in academia and the private sector in the post-fellowship period.
- 3 Aligning traditional government recruitment practices more closely with the fellowship experience may enhance both recruitment and retention outcomes.

CONTEXT (cont.)

Fellowship programs could be a model for changing both recruitment and retention strategies in government. They streamline the application and selection process for those who want to enter government and may also boost retention in government if they attract employees at early stages of their career in ways that produce path-dependent job choices in the future, and if they help build cohorts of peers. However, there is limited rigorous evidence on the effect of public sector fellowship programs on career outcomes or trajectories. Using a novel dataset, we examine whether individuals who participate in a public sector fellowship program are more likely to pursue subsequent careers in government than similarly motivated individuals who applied, but did not participate in such a program.

RESEARCH

In a quasi-experimental design, we estimate the impact of public sector fellowship programs on career outcomes using data on fellows and finalists from four U.S. public sector fellowship programs: Foster America, Govern For America, the Presidential Management Fellows Program, and the Public Rights Project. We follow 17 cohorts of fellows for up to 19 years ($n = 2,141$; 31,153 individual-year observations). These data also include information on program applicants who were not selected as fellows, allowing us to construct a comparison group of similarly motivated non-fellows ("finalists"), defined as applicants who make it to the last stage of the recruitment process and are either not offered or not placed in a fellowship, depending on the organization.

We combine these data with individual-level job and education data from Revelio Labs, a workforce database that compiles information from publicly accessible professional profiles. This allows us to consider employment trajectories and backgrounds for up to 19 years—10 years of education and employment history and up to 9 years after an individual applied for the program. Using a difference-in-differences approach, we estimate the effect of participating in a fellowship program on the following outcomes:

- Government employment, defined as any job in federal, state, or local government
- Any employment, defined as any job, regardless of sector
- Any graduate education, defined as enrollment in a graduate program, regardless of the discipline

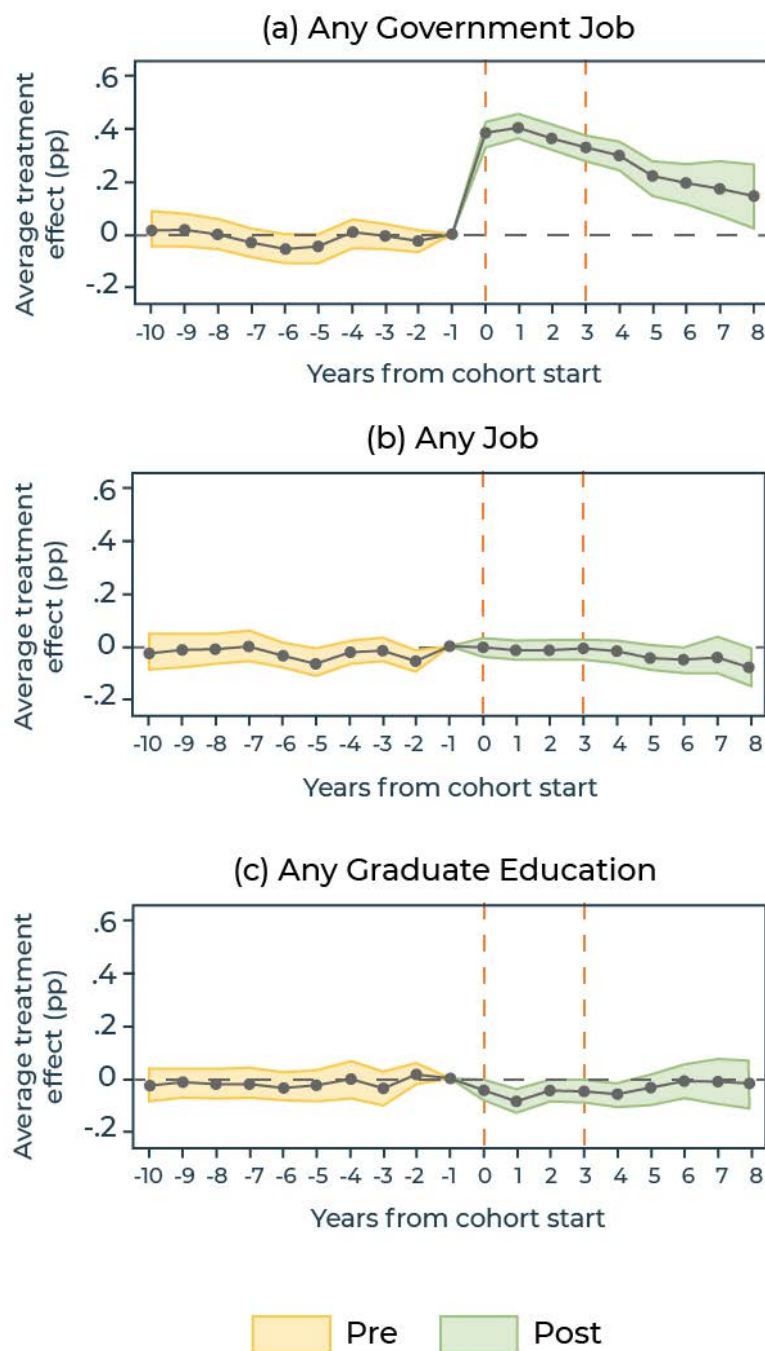
WHAT WE FOUND

1 Participation in fellowship programs significantly increases government employment, with effects persisting up to eight years.

Individuals who participate in a fellowship program are 30 percentage points more likely to hold a government job in the year immediately following the fellowship period than similarly motivated non-fellow finalists.

While the gap in government employment between fellows and finalists shrinks over time, it remains significantly different for at least eight years after the beginning of the fellowship program. Importantly, we find no evidence that this effect is driven by a difference in the likelihood of having any job or of being a student (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Effect of fellowship status on employment and education outcomes



Note: Graphs show average treatment effect estimates from staggered difference-in-differences models. Each graph plots the adjusted difference in outcomes between fellows and similarly motivated non-fellows (“finalists”). Shaded areas reflect 95 percent confidence intervals. The outcome for each plot is (a) Any government job at the federal, state, or local level; (b) any job regardless of the sector; and (c) any enrollment in a graduate program regardless of the discipline.

WHAT WE FOUND (cont.)

2 Finalists are more likely to be employed in industries outside of government, particularly academia, professional services, and other private sector roles.

Of non-fellow finalists, 57 percent also work in government at some point in the years after the fellowship period. However, compared with fellows, many more are employed in other industries, and these choices seem to persist. For instance, similarly motivated non-fellows are 12 percentage points more likely than fellows to work in education or academia (e.g., state or private universities), 7 percentage points more likely to work in professional services (e.g., management consulting or legal services), and 6 percentage points more likely to work in the private sector (e.g., software companies, banks) in the years after the fellowship period.

WHAT'S NEXT

The human capital crisis in government is often framed as a crisis of motivation. This study offers a new perspective by asking what drives career trajectories in government among similarly motivated individuals. We find that individuals who participate in a public sector fellowship program are more likely to remain in government after the end of the fellowship than are similarly motivated fellowship finalists who did not, after all, participate. The effect remains significant for up to eight years after the launch of the fellowship program. While this study does not allow us to identify the specific mechanisms underlying this effect, the findings suggest that these programs may be a promising avenue for attracting talent to government. That said, future research could examine whether reforming traditional government hiring practices in ways that are similar to what fellowship programs often do, such as incorporating cohort-based hiring or skills-based selection, or providing more support during onboarding, is more effective at bringing in new talent. Further research should also explore the mechanisms driving persistence in government employment.

SOURCES

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About The People Lab

The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies for solving urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce; improving resident–government interactions; and reimagining the production and use of evidence.



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